ONE HOUR AND THE NEXT

BY

MILLICENT SUTHERLAND

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ONE HOUR AND THE NEXT

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MILLICENT SUTHERLAND

AND THERE ARE MANY HOURS: EACH
HOUR HAS ITS MEANING, BUT THE SUM
OF ALL HOURS HAS BUT ONE MEANING.

SECOND EDITION

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DEDICATED

TO THE MEMORY OF

V. M. F.

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ONE HOUR AND THE NEXT

CHAPTER I

A MAN AND A GIRL

"UNPUNCTUALITY is no prerogative of woman," said Robert Lester, "a thousand apologies, Miss Stanier."

He slammed the door as he spoke, and walked with a rapid light tread over the carpet of his study to the little table where the girl sat. Her head was averted half defiantly, and her fingers fidgeted with the keys of a typewriter.

"I've only been here twenty minutes, and it doesn't matter waiting, when there is something to wait for," she answered, without looking up. "How are things going?"

"Badly, horribly badly, but the fact is I don't wonder at it; the system on which we fight is nearly as odious as the systems we fight against."

"You always take a gloomy view of things, Mr Lester, I don't believe in your failures. What has happened to-day?"

"Oh, nothing—everything I mean. What's the use of explaining, it's always the same old story."

The girl leant her fair curly head on her hand and pencilled hieroglyphics on the foolscap before her.

"Don't you think you imagine these things?" she ventured.

Lester shook his head impatiently.

"It's not a question of imagination. There's a strong tide against me, and very little unity on our side to meet it."

"I don't think there is any strength at all in the tide against you," she asserted.

"No strength at all in our philanthropists?" said Lester with a laugh. "What optimism! and in this new development of philanthropy, this Christian socialism, which to my mind is mere sophistry. You must keep your wits about you, Miss Stanier, to meet such a tide as that."

"I can't think why you attach such importance to Philip Assheton and his ridiculous followers."

"'Pon my word, I really don't know whether our socialist league is a whit better. One talks of the Christ, the other of the ideal. What can men who know only the fiends of overwork, of injustice, of starvation, understand of either? Appeal to their stomachs, their passions, their instinct for vengeance if you like, but to mince matters and ask them to look at things from the Christian, from the artistic point of view, is only to curb your own convincing power, and blur their vision. Besides, as I've said before, the whole thing on those lines remains pure individualism, for only the rare individual can breathe the inspiration, and I defy you to find more than one individual in five hundred in the working classes who can understand it."

"That's dreadfully stupid of them."

"Not at all. We want a dead level of commonplace speakers, who have been taught to cry the same cry as loudly as possible, to deal with the same commonplace, ghastly needs. At present the socialist army, all talking with different tongues, is a tower of Babel."

Agnes pulled a wry face.

"Must we be commonplace?" she said.

"Why not? Sordid and commonplace, those are the best words—how else would you qualify things?"

"Oh, I don't know—there is a glamour about you and your cause that I can't reconcile with the commonplace. Everything appears to me extraordinary—the evils as well as the remedy."

"What a child you are, and how sick with the measles of enthusiasm. It's a pity that in Stoneyard everyone must grow old quickly."

"That's a rash statement," she cried laughing, looking up archly to see if he recognised the atrociousness of her pun—"but, oh! oh!" she continued, "you're right, this place is dull; you would become as ancient as Methuselah in a week if you lived with father in the schoolhouse."

"Father and the schoolhouse," repeated Lester, "are the forbidden land to me. Why?"

"My fault entirely. He always repeats that he would like to make your acquaintance, much as he would suggest inspecting a new specimen in the South Kensington Museum."

"And you refuse to gratify his curiosity—how tyrannical; I suppose you told him what a bombshell I should be in his hermitage?"

"He knows nothing," she replied evasively; "I was vaguer than vague about you."

"So much the better. I'm far more exercised on another point," he added. "Have you heard anything of the way the wind is blowing among the manufacturers? What are they saying about me now? What's Assheton doing?"

"Philip? I've told you before I don't pay any attention to Philip."

"Ah, that's where you're lacking in perspicuity. I wish you'd realise that he is a big factor in the place."

"How absurd! Philip Assheton has no chance, now the splendid influence of your views is spreading through the town. I believe things have changed enormously since I came to work for you. This great strike is teaching the people to think."

She spoke vaguely—in her admiration of the man, more at home with her adjectives than with a real knowledge of the situation.

"I've no notion of that description," Lester retorted. "To begin with, there's no greatness in this strike. It'll end in smoke. When I'm gone the people will return to slavery, will forget they ever whined, that I ever wanted to help them, and settle into their usual state of beastly content."

He had begun to pace the room with quick wheeling turns at either end, his hands clasped behind his back, his head thrust forward, speaking more to himself than to the girl. She, while following the gist of his tirade, watched with fascinated scrutiny the movements of his big loose-limbed figure, letting her glance creep up his face to the smooth brown head, where a straggling, grey-streaked lovelock half concealed the deep furrow across the brow.

How he dominated her, this man, in his originality and restlessness. How she longed to probe the mystery of his career. He had been the tenant of the house in which they were sitting for barely two months, yet the aspect of everything around them in this small room was essentially part of his personality. The aroma of his tobacco clung to the curtains, to the furniture, to everything that could be handled. His sketches and prints were scattered with total disregard of symmetry on walls, tastelessly decorated by a former tenant with garish paper. Upon the tables, or across the top of an unexpected Broadwood piano, lay his pamphlets and books heaped amidst a medley of caps, pipes and smoking accessories in luxuriant disorder. The attractive modernity of it all contrasted so vividly with the stiff and scanty adornment of her old-fashioned home down the street.

In such an environment she realised it was possible to feel, possible in spite of the stress of a daily task to dream dreams.

The window of the room was open, a feeble effort to admit a new atmosphere; it let in more readily on

the still air, heavy with presage of storm, a drift of floating sounds—the shout or laugh of a lounger; the wail of the hurdy-gurdy outside the "Bird-in-Hand" mingling with the faint notes of the organ played in the church behind the house. The distant discord forcing itself on her attention made the girl eager to close the window. She was jealous of an influence that jarred on the attractiveness of her mood. Yet she knew that in her action towards her surroundings she was more disciplined than in her desires. In Lester's presence she was ever shackled by an inexplicable restraint.

He stood by her now and for a second his roving dark eyes, set too closely together, met hers. Then he averted his gaze, biting nervously at the short moustache which in no way concealed the sharply indented, disdainful lines of his mouth.

"What I want to see," he went on bitterly, following up the all-engrossing subject in spite of his pretended contempt of it, "is the gospel of discontent preached from the house-tops to the slaves of England. I've had all the poetry and sentimental bosh knocked out of me long ago. I hate to see the putrid corpse of reality decked out in the fine feathers of theories. Let them see it naked in all its horror. Where do you find God, or good, or hope at all in the world as it is? I see nothing but men's unreasonableness and their despair."

A note of sudden, mastering emotion had crept into his voice, as if a personal grief had evolved from his moaning for mankind. With a queer little sound like a sob, he stopped his hurried pacing and buried his head in his arms against the mantel-piece.

Agnes Stanier was startled by his vehemence. She did not understand the extravagance of his moods, she was perplexed by their capriciousness; still, in her exalted opinion of the man and his cause, her critical faculties appeared at a loss;

in all phases she accepted him with unswerving approval. She thrilled now with impulsive sympathy, longing to make herself needful to him, to offer him, what she, in the exquisite conceit of her youth imagined would be consolation, the placing of her life's devotion at his command in the battle he was waging with such dogged determination.

She held out her hand. She would, had she dared it, have laid it upon his shoulder.

"Don't," she said, "don't!—if I could only help you, if I could only—" she stopped, stumbling over her words.

The look he turned to her was utterly irresponsive; in that second all his composure had been regained.

"Behold the terrors of a crank," he said abruptly. "A man-trap which yawns for your sex as dangerously as for ours. Please beware, Miss Stanier—" then apparently desiring to create a new impression, he put his hand across a pile of papers upon the table. "What about our work?" he asked.

Authority was in the action, utter innocence of the thoughts that were in her mind in his words. Certainly she was there to do his bidding, not as his confidante but as his clerk; what ground had she to expect anything else? Yet in this check to her confidence her pride was mortified. She bent her head over a portfolio of loose notes, and answered sullenly.

"I can't get through all this—perhaps a quarter of it."

"I don't wish to tire you."

"Well, if you'll send the typewriter up to me to-morrow, I'll get the remainder finished then; will that do?"

"Perfectly, if you can let me have it before post time. You don't mind writing on Sunday, then?—

it doesn't"—he spoke with a slight sarcastic intonation—"interfere with your church-going? I should be sorry that your father . . ."

She interrupted him brusquely.

"I know what you're going to say, and you shan't say it. As if I cared about the church, or father, or in fact anything at all except our cause."

"The most glorious cause the world has ever known; isn't that it? You see I'm quoting from memory," and Lester with a little grimace dropped into the arm-chair, where he sat, neither reading nor writing, his legs stretched out, his whole body relaxed in moody meditation; from the short pipe in his mouth wreaths of smoke curled slowly upwards.

The girl took up her occupation unwillingly; sometimes she glanced towards him furtively, but there was no recollection of her presence on his part—no hint of attention to the moment in his posture. Only once during the hour did he move. It was when the barrel-organ reaching the pavement outside the house struck up "The Sweet by and by." "Curse that thing!" he said roughly, springing from his chair to shut the window, and at this sudden sympathy of idea Agnes smiled with renewed contentment.

There was an end at last to the harassing repetition of the typewriter. The girl turned and addressed him with decision.

"I shan't do any more to-night. I'm worn out."

Her copying this afternoon had been exceptionally tiresome. She only wished to make him talk; the silence of his thoughts oppressed her.

"Shall you go through the proofs?" she persisted as he failed to answer.

He lifted his head slowly, and for the first time drew her into the full comprehension of his gaze.

"Yes, thanks—presently—they're sure to be all right."

"You're very confident."

"You're so hard-working, Miss Stanier, you inspire confidence. I'm glad the machine is at peace though."

"You didn't appear to pay much attention to it," she retorted.

"No, not to-night—I was thinking."

"Are you sure you weren't asleep?"

"Not a bit of it."

"What were you thinking about, then?"

"About you."

He leaned forward and pulled at the wires of the typewriter absently.

"About me, indeed," laughed Agnes.

"Yes, about you—about our struggle."

The girl's eyes shone with interest. "Ah, the struggle!" she said.

"You don't half grasp our difficulties. What about organising our ranks. At present disorganisation is rife. One kind of reformer here and another there, and a tug of war between the lot of them. Union of force is essential in the town. You know you can do a good deal in that direction. You don't mind a little trouble to help me—to help the cause," he corrected, "do you?"

"Mind a little trouble?" she exclaimed, "I should think not. I only wish I could do more—much more!"

At her answer Lester stood up, and thrusting both hands into his pockets, moved nearer to the fender. The evening light fell full on her up-turned face. He could not fail to notice the joyousness in her look, the alertness and expectancy in her pose.

"Go on—go on!" she cried eagerly. "Am I to be a recruit in the battle at last?"

"It's nothing very grand that I want you to do," he answered hurriedly, as if racing to a point. "Things as they are have to be tackled, and pride must be pocketed. I spoke of the strong influence against me. I don't allude to the obstinacy of the Union leaders, nor to the sermons of the Reverend Bass Burgoyne; narrowed down it comes to neither more nor less than the influence of one man, Philip Assheton. You spoke lightly of him just now, but he's a force to be reckoned with, do you see?"

"Yes," said the girl slowly, looking as if she did not see at all.

"His touch is with the masters and with the men. He would soften the former, and force the latter to accept an absurd compromise. There is no compromise possible, in my opinion. The men's full demands must be conceded at once, or the strike must go on until they are. These dyers are a weak lot, they've not the backbone of the miners, nor are they sufficient in number to attract attention in the country, but it's these small triumphs that make our ranks grow. It's maddening to have slaved here and to be beaten in the end. Philip Assheton is one of these so-called Christian Socialists, and spouts of reform, they tell me, all day long. I'm wide-minded enough, in all conscience, to work equally with infidel and Christian. Why in heaven's name doesn't he identify himself with us then? Speak up for justice in this heavily handicapped struggle? Not a bit of it. He's the philanthropic coddler pure and simple. His socialism is wrapped in blankets and stuffed with soup tickets. He fosters the very evils we would destroy, he humbugs—" Lester broke off, quivering with the effort to control his resentment, to bring his emotion into line with the object of his speech.

"You allow that he's a humbug," she said slowly.

"As a socialist I've always thought him one. What do you want with him, then?"

Through the grey smoke from his pipe that hung in wreaths between them, Lester noted that her face was troubled.

"That's just it, Miss Stanier," he went on eagerly; "humbug or no humbug, we want him, and I see no one who is to get round him by fair means or any means, if you like, but you. That's what I'm pleading for. You must drag him into our camp or stop his mouth. What you really might do is to get him to speak for the League; at the Labour Church, let's say, not at the public house. Plenty of velveteen curtains and Walter Crane designs will suit him. Tell him to get over his scruples and come and say anything he likes. I'll make every concession he wants if he'll identify himself with us, and you can persuade him to do so. See if you can't." And Lester, emptying the ashes from his pipe into the grate with little vicious jerks, looked at the girl with some embarrassment.

The words fell upon her eagerness like an avalanche. With revolt at heart, she sat dumbly. This, then, was the help she was to give; this—this—so different from what she had imagined, so *banal*, yet so impossible. "Any woman can make a man say 'Yes,'" she thought with scorn. That part was easy enough—but why should she be made to ask favours of Philip Assheton, the man who with courteous irony treated her socialist aspirations as an affectation, but whose adoration of her as a woman, though never obtrusive, was to her an undoubted knowledge. The man she respected, insulted, avoided, with a dislike that was almost hatred in the impulsiveness of her unreasoning nature. No, no, she could not do it, and for the first time a half-acknowledged feeling of resentment rose within her at Lester's misjudgment of his opponent's character. Was he frightened

of Assheton? What made him imagine that he was in any way needful to them? Why did he want her to do this mean work—this odious work? She must tell him her decision at once, now while she felt the necessity of it strongly upon her. With a singing in her ears, she came and stood upon the hearthrug beside him. Her chair fell over upon the floor noisily as she moved.

"I'm very sorry," she said nervously, "very sorry indeed, but it's the one thing I can't do—it's impossible."

He did not answer for a moment, but fixed her through his half-closed lids meditatively. Then he bent down and picked up the chair to sit astride of it.

"Why not?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"Philip Assheton and I are not particularly good friends. I don't suppose he'd listen to me—he's very obstinate. I—I don't want to ask him."

"Don't want to ask him—not very good friends?" Lester pursed his mouth. "Those are paltry excuses, surely. Why, I thought he adored you! You're a very original young woman, but not quite original enough to be innocent of who are your slaves. The only kind of slavery one ought to approve of, eh?"

The colour rushed into the girl's face and out again, and left her quite pale.

"You've no right to say that," she said, doggedly.

Lester shifted his ground. "A thousand pardons, Miss Stanier, but I confess you puzzle me. Your complete willingness just now to serve the cause on any point misled me."

"I thought you wished for something quite—quite different."

"Don't you know," he replied good-humouredly, "that the rank and file are not usually consulted as to the plan of campaign?"

She was nettled.

"I daresay I've no right to rebel—no right to say how surprising your idea about Philip Assheton appears to me."

"I'm perfectly willing," Lester insisted, "to enter into a fair discussion with you, if you'll give me some fair reasons for a refusal. At present you've not put one forward."

"In the first place," she said evasively, "I can't see what good he can do us. You overrate his position altogether."

"As you underrate it," said Lester firmly. "I have considered the matter most carefully and come to the conclusion that Assheton's help is absolutely all-important, on the principle that he who is not with us must be against us."

"Why should you expect that I should win his help? Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"Ah, that would be a useless undertaking. Assheton's an odd fellow, but I believe he's wise enough to dislike me. Under the circumstances, that he will refuse you is unlikely; men enjoy being cajoled by pretty women. Listen; without his co-operation, I don't give much for the success of our strivings; I may as well pack up my traps and begin fresh battles over the sea—it would be a different story with thousands at one's back in America to plodding away at this pig-headed handful in purblind England. But," he went on impetuously, as she kept silence, "let me tell you more about it all. Let me try to convince you." And in her unwilling ears he poured forth with melodramatic intensity, the pros and cons of the situation, the loneliness of his position, his weeks of effort, of self-sacrifice. "And it's obvious," he wound up at last, "how it all is. The hard part is for me; my one helper here fails me, and consequently all my past work is as nothing—that's the mischief."

His pleading had been theatrical in its eloquence, but for its purpose it hardly overshot the mark. Agnes, rolling a pocket handkerchief into a ball in her clammy hand, felt her helplessness. At some moments and for some people her defiance was a ready weapon, but she knew it was useless to ignore the power of this tormentor. Whilst he spoke she kept her eyes averted from him, but he drew them to his at last and chained them there.

"I've many other arguments up my sleeve, if I thought you'd listen to them."

"Why should I listen to them?" she answered fretfully; "it's not the arguments. I daresay they're good ones, but they'd make no difference exactly."

"I can't make you out," he said mendaciously; "so full of devotion for our cause at one moment, and shying next at a trifle of this sort. Probably you don't believe me and my reasons?"

"Oh yes, I believe you."

"Then in spite of all I've said, is your determination final?"

She paused for some moments in her reply—her voice sank almost to a whisper. "I'd rather—ever so much rather not do it. Please don't press it—please! please!"

He shrugged his shoulders and dawdled across to the piano. He touched the notes faintly at first, and still talking, dropped into a melody of Grieg's.

"Afraid of the risk of testing your power?" he went on drily. "Even in a little thing of such infinite service and of infinitesimal annoyance from your point of view. It's decidedly disappointing, but after all life has never held any better luck for me!" and he began to hum the words of a song, as if the matter were at an end.

The girl gave a shiver of despair. She knew the victory was his, for all her senses were enthralled by

his evident need of her, by the sweetness of the music. She went and stood close to the piano. He continued to sing *sotto voce*, and ignored her presence.

"Would you give me time to think it over?" she interrupted at last, feeling that something must be said. "It's such a difficult thing to settle about in a hurry."

He turned on the music stool and looked up at her.

"Ah, you still wish to think it over?"

"I want so much to please you, but not immediately. It doesn't matter if I don't ask Philip immediately, does it?"

"It's not a question of a favour to me—it's for the sake of our cause—for the sake of a victory. I don't really see why you should delay making up your mind. Why not settle one way or the other to-night? Of course if it's so distasteful a matter don't let's mention it again, but I think your objections, Miss Stanier, absurd."

His manner had stiffened into formality. He bent his head over the keyboard; the chords grew louder. She, watching him apprehensively under her lashes, could see that his whole bearing was on the defensive, that his disapproval grew momentarily more apparent. She became frightened of her own irresolution; impulsively she touched his arm. "Stop—please stop!" she cried.

Again he ceased playing, waiting politely.

"As you make a point of it," she continued reluctantly, "I'll do my best. I'll ask him,—but, remember there's no certainty that I shall succeed—none at all."

For Lester it had been an easy triumph, but he acknowledged it gravely.

"Come," he said, "that's nice of you, and your best is all I ask."

She turned from him and he followed her; for an instant he took both her hands between his with a caressing gesture that made her heart beat wildly.

"Thank you" — he repeated — "for the sake of matters here I'm doubly grateful."

But his expression of feeling passed quickly. As he resumed his reserved demeanour, Agnes experienced a dull throbbing in her head, a numbness fell upon her spirit. She closed the case of the typewriter and gathered up her cloak and hat mechanically. How dark it was growing; she shivered a little as if the shadow of twilight creeping between her and Lester held some presentiment.

"Are you going already?" he asked.

"I'm of no more use," she replied wearily.

"There is a limit even to usefulness," he suggested.

In the doorway they shook hands. The cool touch of his fingers in her palm struck her queerly with the same feeling of power that he had evoked when earlier in the evening he had laid them on the business papers.

"I'm spending a couple of days in London, but don't forget the promise," he added lightly to his farewell—"it's important."

CHAPTER II

SIDE-LIGHTS

PUZZLED and sore at heart Agnes wended her way down the street.

She was furious at her own weakness, and yet fully aware of how voluntary was her abasement before the man for whom she worked. Two months ago she had taken up her task, had entered into an engagement with Robert Lester to typewrite, as stranger with stranger. He remained the stranger yet, but she was his bond-servant, his slave, chained not only to his cause but to himself; and she knew, as she clenched her little fists, that nothing could change the situation, that in spite of her incomprehension of his motives and plans, she would die for them if he wished it, and that gladly.

The early winter day was closing in—a cold wind blew down the street. Overhead banks of heavy clouds augured snow,—far away on the horizon one long flame of orange lingered from the sunset. In the town the day's work was at an end; here and there sounded a hollow whistle, and the tramp of feet on the cobble stones betokened the closing of the weaving mills. The house where John Stanier carried on his school stood back a little from the pavement, rusty iron railings surrounded it from either side of the portico; picturesque in its uneven outline, it was the oldest in a row of Elizabethan houses. The roof alone had been re-tiled, and its redness was gleaming now from the tracks of a passing shower.

Agnes stood still in the middle of the pavement; groups of hatless mill girls hurried by and looked up inquisitively, and men in twos and threes, when they saw her, laughed a little together.

But how few the workers to-night! Listless batches of loafers around the tavern door, and at the end of the street, a crowd. The strike had changed the whole complexion of the town. The life of the place, always full, if slow and silent, appeared to have grown stagnant. It seemed as if these whilom toilers, now haggard waiters upon events, were beginning to scent the noisome breath of their own enforced idleness, and guess its peril.

The crowd that had gathered grew larger. Agnes, curious, followed the meandering of the stragglers, and in an instant forgot herself and her grievances, to revel in the vicissitudes of a street fight.

The two men locked together in the road were no mere bear-fighting comrades fresh from the beer-house at the corner. Rather, to judge from the determined set of their countenances, it was a tooth and nail, live or die, encounter. With unsteady balance they staggered backwards and forwards, first one and then the other seizing the advantage for savage onslaught, till the blood spurted from both, and the scarlet drops, trickling on waistcoats and coat sleeves, besprinkled even the muddy gutter. The watchers of the combat hung back a yard or two to follow with approving glances each swinging blow, and in the silences of the struggle to shout a series of hoarse encouragements, as contradictory in import as they were original in expression.

Louder and louder grew the voices, fiercer the fight. The girl was carried away by excitement born of the tumult. Here was action at last. Comers and goers filed past, cries in chorus echoed near, but the struggle alone absorbed her. These men were wrestling for her cause — the cause of

Robert Lester—for what she believed was the great cause of the world.

For a time they had appeared well matched. Now one of them exhausted, his face growing grey, reeled at the mercy of his antagonist; another second would have seen him stretched out, vanquished and disabled; but in that second a new crisis had been reached. The figure of a policeman loomed ominously from out the increasing darkness; in his note-book the white paper shone whiter in the last glimmer of daylight. The fighters slouched back sullenly at his approach, with a sense of a coming justice other than what they demanded, and around them the onlookers closed in, staring stupidly.

Night in a few minutes hid the sordid scene. Flakes of snow fell intermittently. A lamplighter, indifferent to all save his duties, set the gas jets burning along the street, and Agnes, half longing to effect a rescue of the heroes, half contemptuous at their speedy surrender, turned with lagging footsteps and went home.

It was silent, this schoolhouse, with a silence that in her present turbulent mood struck the girl unpleasantly.

"How dull, how deadly dull," she repeated to herself, as she went into her father's study.

He sat alone, writing, and the scratch of his pen, as it travelled backwards and forwards quickly over paper, sounded continuously in the still room.

His scholars, day boarders all of them, had been dismissed an hour or two ago.

Without speaking, the girl went to the window and dragged the red baize curtains together with impatient jerks, as if she feared a face might be prying through the panes. Then she tossed her hat on to the horse-hair sofa and sauntered back to the table. Kneeling down beside it, chin in palm, she stared, under the shade of the dim lamp,

at the pale, clean-shaven countenance of the man before her. Sombre books, piled high on either side, framed his square figure. He did not raise his head.

"You don't understand comfort, Father," she said, trying to attract his attention: "have you had your tea—who lit your lamp? Why didn't they make up the fire?"

"Three questions in one," he answered quietly. "Will a single answer do for all? I was busy."

"Busy? Oh! the old sort of business, I suppose —so useless now—correcting Latin prose, or scanning those dull verses. I've been at a street fight."

"Really!"

"I suppose you think it unnatural for a woman to care about such a thing—please don't mind saying so. But for me, it was simply splendid to see Challinor go for that sneak Milligan. He's been staying in with one or two other mixers all through the strike. If Challinor hadn't been such a little bit of a thing he would have had the best of it; as it was I suspect his jaw was broken.

"Are these details of revenge very edifying?"

Agnes wriggled on to her feet and walked to the fireplace.

"Yes. I knew you'd be shocked," she declared, poker in hand; "but it's no use expecting impossibilities about me. I can't pass my existence like a mummy in a spirit bottle. I want to live a bit, and to feel things."

"And to think not at all," he suggested.

"You're right," answered the girl nonchalantly, holding the poker amongst the coals with one hand, and arranging her curls in the glass over the mantelpiece with the other. "At this moment anything but thought."

She had remembered Philip Assheton.

"What have you done to-day?" asked the school-

master quietly as if anxious to avoid the flippant argument that characterised his daughter's interviews with him.

"Listening—learning—typewriting—till my fingers ache," she answered. "Mr Lester's taking things rather seriously at present. It sharpens one's wits to be with such a man."

"And for what purpose? These mushroom movements that engross him are characteristic of the degeneration of the time. They appear to me unworthy of serious consideration."

"It's a good thing for progress that we're not all of the same mind. Mr Lester says the world has never been in a worse plight, that we're suffering from the false economic conditions that have reigned for the last hundred years. He declares that unless enlightened men and women make an effort there'll be a revolution all through the country. The state our industrial systems are in is perfectly appalling."

There was a sententious authority in the last words that rang strangely in the young voice. It arrested Stanier's attention. He put down his pen.

"Then it's over theories of this description that you waste your time."

"Yes," said the girl hurriedly, dropping the poker with a clatter into the grate. "But then you've never considered that anyone knows what's what, since the days of Queen Anne."

Stanier glanced up at his daughter. She stood slim and tall beside him, and had tilted back her curly head till it almost brushed the plaster models of Donatello's masterpieces behind her over the mantelshelf. Her arms were folded defiantly, she looked at him under the dusky lids of her wide blue eyes. She was so youthful, so positive, so ignorant, and yet in some ways so far beyond him.

"I object," he said sternly—repressing as he watched

her a sudden rush of feeling—"that anyone should put you at loggerheads with common sense. I feel however, powerless to combat Mr Lester's opinions without knowing him. Is the forming of an acquaintanceship between us to be indefinitely postponed?"

"Just as you will," she answered, assuming indifference. "I daresay he would come here if you really wanted him to. You'll find him perfectly logical."

Yet even as she made this assertion she wondered at herself.

Stanier went on talking.

"That's a relief. The sooner he comes the better."

"You don't accuse him of having made me his disciple," flashed back the girl.

"Disciple of what? Of these absurdities? Surprising you certainly are, but I can't believe you would carry their high-flown sentiments and copy-book phrases after the education you have had, beyond the clicking of your machine. If it were different"—his voice shook a little—"if I thought you—a child of mine—really identified yourself with the odiousness of such latter day ideas save by the light way in which you have bandied words this evening, I—I think——" he hesitated, checking his pronouncement.

"What do you think?" she cried eagerly.

There had been a changed note in his voice.

"It hardly matters. I no more know what the future brings, than what your wishes are, except that these always seem opposed to mine."

Agnes dropped into the rocking chair and tilted it back ungracefully. She felt aggrieved.

"Well, you're always talking about the necessity for work, and now I toil for my daily bread you do nothing but grumble."

"It's strange enough work for a girl in your position

to take up—this scribbling for an itinerant wire-puller."

"Oh, I shall have something better to do when the strike's over. I can't break an engagement now. Besides, it interests me. What else would you have me do? I should hate to be a teacher."

"You've been trying to teach me all the evening."

"That's quite different. I mean a sort of monument of learning—a paragon of perfection for the example and instruction of small boys—like you and Philip for instance."

"Like Philip." A tender inflection vibrated in the schoolmaster's voice. "You might do worse than be like Philip."

"Your right hand," said Agnes, rising and making a mock curtsey; "and" — with emphasis — "a socialist?"

"His character is the best in all the world, his private opinions have nothing to do with me."

"You inconsistent old darling, but as it is you're quite right—Philip isn't a socialist a bit, only a great big H.B., which means in plain language, a humbug."

She thought pitilessly of the man of whom she spoke. John Stanier made no reply.

"You'll never hear anything against Philip," she persisted, pirouetting round the room. But as he still failed to take up her words, she checked her chatter to lean over the sofa and ponder at the strange ignorance of this father of hers regarding her ideas and her disposition. He did not seem to recognise that typewriting was but the means to an end, that her life was being moulded more and more to the new lessons that poured themselves into her young being, and shaped the views and determinations, that must sooner or later be acknowledged and accepted. She thought it now no longer an indignity but a relief that John Stanier went his way and

appeared to ignore her's. With a twinge of shame she realized that his innocence on many matters, which hitherto on occasions had seemed as gall and wormwood, meant for her merely greater freedom, greater independence to find pleasure where she already thought it tasted sweetest, in the intoxication of its attraction hardly knowing how or why.

Yet to-night she was unaccountably glad at his annoyance. A desire arose to tell her father the whole story of the compact with Lester, to beg him to take the burden of the undertaking on his shoulders. She looked towards him, half imagining that he guessed the thoughts in her mind, but, buried again amongst his papers, he appeared to have forgotten her presence.

In the street heavy footsteps hastened by. As she heard them they reminded her of outside events to which she was linked and with which he had neither part nor lot, and she shrank from a confession.

Then the door opened, and a man stood irresolutely on the threshold, looking in. A man, out at elbows and short in trousers, a soft crimson tie knotted loosely under the turn-down collar of a frayed cotton shirt. He had the brow of a scholar and the wide, pale eyes of the enthusiast, but the weak falling away of chin and jaw indicated the failure. In age he might have been sixty but was probably not more than forty-five.

The sound of creaking slippers caused Stanier to raise his head sharply.

"Come in, Nicholas, come in," he said testily; "don't stand there. You've something to say, I suppose."

The man shuffled into the room. As he approached the schoolmaster his dim eyes were full of apology. He hid some papers that he had held in his hand, and buttoned his coat over them.

"I'll come back, John," he said nervously, looking

from the father to the daughter. "It's nothing of importance—I'll come back."

Agnes bounded forward. Her cheeks were flushed.

"No, Nicholas, stop, you're a godsend. We were arguing. Father doesn't want to talk to me. Have you brought my verses?"

"That's just the question, Miss Agnes. They were exquisite lines." He bent anxiously towards Stanier: "I suppose, John, you've heard no news from the *Leeds Mercury* or the *Pall Mall?* Copies of the papers came with the second delivery, but I cannot find my name mentioned."

Stanier was not inclined to be tolerant.

"Don't be ridiculous, Nicholas," he said. We shall hear nothing from the *Leeds Mercury* or the *Pall Mall.*"

Nicholas heaved a heavy sigh.

"It seems to me that there is some malign influence in the publishing world against my name and my talent," he objected. "This constant disappointment is sorely fretting."

"If you can't get over the mania to figure in the public press your disappointments are likely to be eternal. What is much more important, have you made that translation from Herodotus yet?"

"No, no, John, not yet, but I assure you truly it will be ready to-morrow morning, at least"—correcting himself—"on Monday morning, quite ready."

"Procrastination, always procrastination."

"It's not my fault, I assure you." The excuses trembling on his white lips remained unspoken. A sense of injustice overwhelmed him. He worked for Stanier as well as he could, but why should he be denied time for the outburst of his own inspirations? How little Stanier understood him, when the blessed spirits of the air admitted him into secrets of which few had conception, even into unseen

worlds, where in his fancy he grew conscious of the widening of scene beyond scene, the rising of height beyond height. In the remembrance of this he gathered himself together proudly, but the nerves under his dry, wrinkled skin quivered with misery and resentment.

Agnes burst out laughing, as she looked at him.

"Oh, my dear old Nicholas, the ghost of Hamlet's father was flesh and blood compared to you. You give me the creeps. Never mind about that poetry."

"It's not a question of minding," interrupted Stanier, "Nicholas has to do his work as I wish him to do it. I can't allow this neglect. Kindly arrange"—and he emphasised his words with a tap of the paper knife on the table—"that I have the Greek paper before nine on Monday. I'm not asking too much. You have to take Raglan, Seaman and Kerr in the morning. You're letting them get terribly out of hand; Assheton's class is forging far ahead."

"I know, I know," came the nervous protest; "if I'm sadly dilatory it's because the boys have been a little worrying to me lately, but I regret my lack of decision, yes, indeed, John, I regret it."

He turned, dreading further admonitions, and anxious to hide his suffering from Stanier's severity. With a pathetic droop of his whole figure, he shuffled across the hall as he had come, fumbling a little with the key as he turned it in the lock of his den and leaving the door of the study wide in his wake.

Agnes addressed her father impulsively.

"You're hard on him," she declared, "harder than you are on me. We're different, everyone; why should we be alike — a bag of bones made of your cut and dried dictums? Ah, look at me," she went on feverishly, throwing her arms round his neck from behind the chair, "if I'm a trial with my schemes and fancies, I wish you were

a tiny bit different, could just in a measure understand a little." She paused, and for a moment in her arms the whole rigidity of his attitude relaxed; those who could have seen the expresion of his face would have noted the softening of every line, in a sudden wave of happiness. He appeared almost afraid to move, afraid to loosen her embrace; so he sat silent when she expected him to speak, his chin just touching the knuckles of her clasped hands, till at last, mistaking his reserve for displeasure, she pushed herself away from him.

"You're so unsympathetic," she said indignantly, "so hatefully unsympathetic."

The spell was broken. John Stanier's voice rang harder than ever.

"Unsympathetic, am I? Sympathy is a word capable of queer definitions; you use the word lightly."

"Lightly, perhaps," she answered with a shrug, and a quick change of manner, "but I know what I mean. However, I won't dispute about it. Goodnight," and breaking into a jaunty whistle she went out and left him.

Stanier sat staring into distance, self-criticising. His reflections, unpacified, appeared to rouse a turmoil in his breast.

He pushed his papers roughly from him, and covered his face with his hands. "Both," he almost groaned, "so far from me. Better death than the darkness of soul that rises between those who should love the most. She asked me to understand her. Is it her fault, or is it mine, that I fail to rise from the crushing fatefulness of the years in which I might have lived as I wished, and measured the breadth of life for every man—now I can't—I can't. Shall I ever come to make allowance? will they?"

"After all," he went on, with a quick return to self-possession. "what's the good of this despair?

There are some things over which we are helpless. Work is left to me, and courage; thank God, courage, it's never failed me yet, why should it now?"

Afraid of allowing his mind to raise further speculations, he sorted the clean ruled sheets in order before him, and took up a book of reference. The room grew cold, and noticing the door ajar, he rose from his chair and went to close it. On the threshold lay a small handkerchief, and a crumpled paper covered with scribbled verses evidently fallen from a pocket.

He lifted both the paper and the handkerchief, and laid them gently on the table beside him.

When twelve o'clock struck, the fire had dwindled to a heap of smouldering ashes, and the household was asleep. The schoolmaster alone sat writing on into the night.

CHAPTER III

MAKES SOME EXPLANATIONS

THE tragedy of circumstance which creeps for choice among the men of peace and hope, had years ago marked John Stanier with its indelible brand.

For generations past the Staniers had been an old midland family of comparative affluence. The studiousness and culture, stronger characteristics of the scions of its race than mental capacity, had blossomed at last in John, an only child, into intellect. At school and college the youth had carried all before him, and won the affection and respect of his rivals by his simplicity and the quaint sternness of his rectitude. His parents wove the future into golden patterns for their promising son. He had won honours—he would win fame. They were limited in the scope of their ambition—an Oxford fellowship as a stepping-stone, an Oxford professorship as a throne. It was for this they prayed, and their imagination, though it flew no further, carried the insatiable desire to the last quiver of its flutterings.

John Stanier himself was totally devoid of worldly considerations. He knew that to drink of the great stream of knowledge he must push all the froth and flotsam that clogged the surface of things away. He must get the draught in its purity. Therefore he took the money that gave him the opportunities, and the opportunities that brought him the delight, almost unseeingly; for the knowledge itself, his love was an absorbing passion.

One February morning came the swift malignity of disaster. Isaac Stanier was found dead in his bed, and as the result of incautious investments and the irregularities of the family solicitor, John and his mother were left almost penniless.

It was a complete reversal of fortune for the young man, but he obeyed his orders unflinchingly. Deep into the foundation of his being, a moral courage had been welded, which enabled him, if he had had dreams to ignore them, if he writhed under his sorrow, to fight it silently. Without a plaint he bade farewell to his college career, and storing his books in the cupboards of his old home in Stoneyard, he started a day school for young gentlemen whose fathers paid handsomely to give them the classical education, which their dull brains could rarely assimilate.

Patiently the schoolmaster toiled through the years, the wreck of his life ever before his eyes, and the while, from his iron self-control, a certain weakness grew, like a parasite on his best self. Adapted as his existence was to the trend of circumstances, he presented ever an obstinate bearing towards the spirit of new teaching; he shrank from the startling notions and paradoxes of the modern school of thought. With his vision trained to one point of view, in the earlier years of his suffering he dared not, in later years he could not, look to the right or to the left.

It was true that into the minds of his younger acquaintances he had a keener insight than he was credited with, but the power of this insight was to a large extent sterilized by a lack of understanding of his discoveries, and consequent confusion about them. His judgments were occasionally unfair, his prognostications on a boy's character often falsified. He remained ignorant of the successive phases which a mind may undergo, and quelling every instinct

to press forward, he clung like his dog-eared books to the fiats of the eternal, spurning the amendments of time.

Small wonder was it, then, that whilst he interpreted Horace or the problems of Euclid to his pupils, to them he could never interpret himself. They came to the school, they worked, they left, remembering Stanier in after years as their master, not as their friend. His mother sat by the chimney corner, knitting and lamenting until her death. Fate had wrenched all hopes for the scholar from her, she never learned to appreciate the son.

When he was eight-and-twenty he married a girl who had come for a whim to learn art-work in the town; a girl of position and wit, but self-engrossed and devoid of the perception by means of which a wiser woman would have fathomed her husband's nature, even through the crust of reserve growing yearly thicker. At heart he gave her devotion, but where she looked for its expression, he walked speechless, and she died three years later, crying to him, as he stood dry-eyed in his misery, that he had killed her.

The two children of the marriage were removed by an indignant aunt for their nursery and childhood's training, and though he resented this interference, he felt unequal to rebellion and acquiesced in the arrangement. They grew up far from him while he walked on steadily into middle age. Nebulous years were those thirties and forties, but he came through them at last with his dark hair turning white, his words and opinions softened, and the taint of philistinism in his attitude towards the ways and vagaries of the world in which he lived, in a sense less apparent. It was about this time that Nicholas Clulow came to live with him. People wondered at the change from the pushing young teachers, who in turn had been previously engaged, disliked, and

dismissed. But none knew Clulow's story, nor of Stanier's up-lifting of the dreamer from the gutter of ruin. "A distant cousin" some suggested; another "An old schoolfellow in straitened circumstances." "My friend" Stanier himself had said casually one day when he walked across to the doctor's; that was all that could be learned; Stanier's private affairs had long evaded the gossip of the town.

Yet the schoolmaster felt with bitterness that even this broken life under his protection, gave him but a trembling respect, and a grudging gratitude. He recognised the impossibility, on account of the limitations of his nature, of rousing affection from the sources where he might well have expected it, and it set within him, predominant over all other feelings, an indescribable dread of his children's return from their distant schools. He feared a possible estrangement with positive terror.

He had seen his son and daughter rarely, for the mother's relations had done their best to keep them apart, and the letters that had passed were few and far between.

Yet often in his leisure moments, he had hungered for their presence, the very contradiction of his desires baffling analysis. Morning after morning, he would pray that his children's coming might be delayed, might never take place—at night he would lie awake in a desperate longing to see them, to touch them, to hold them in his arms.

His son was the first to come, handsome and self-important, and the father taken unawares, felt the pride at his appearance leaping up in his heart. As he walked about, his hand on the youth's shoulder, his tongue loosened, he talked of the future—of distinction,—living his own life over again in a sudden intoxication of early memories.

But the boy was restless; he looked out on the narrow street and whistled, and one day he spoke.

"I must see the world, father—no! don't talk of books—I hate them. Let me go and prospect for gold in Canada or South Africa—I can't stay here."

And he went; his father in the pain of the reopened wound of his life, speaking no word of remonstrance; rather he fumbled with the pages of the steamboat guide, and strapped his son's valise, self-reproachful at having nursed the illusion of other possibilities; only when the cab rattled away to the station and he walked through the empty room, did he realise his desolation more keenly than he had ever done before. He had looked into the eyes of lost hopes—lost joys—their ghosts refused to be laid. As he buried himself under a pressure of work, there remained in his heart a terrible yearning.

Months passed uneventfully till Stanier, on a visit to an old college acquaintance at Rugby, met Philip Assheton.

They spoke little, and argued; but the soul of the younger man rang against the soul of the elder with all the force of an intellectual sympathy.

The hand that Stanier had held out ungrasped, for a quarter of a century, was grasped at last, and Assheton went back with him to Stoneyard, nominally to teach in the school for a term or two, but determined to probe into the inmost mind of this strange schoolmaster, and if possible to rouse and comfort him with the strength of his own convictions, and enthusiasms.

On this point, however, he had miscalculated. With his convictions and enthusiasms he made very little headway; it was his character, his principles, that appealed to Stanier—they alone broke down the barriers of reserve and moulded their friendship.

Assheton and his sister, who, although some ten years his senior, had made her brother the fetish of a life's devotion—had been established in the gabled cottage

beyond the school for several months, when, on the eve of her eighteenth birthday, John Stanier's daughter came dancing home. She put her arms round her father's neck with pretty protests, and sat at his feet in the garden during long August evenings, chattering from the fulness of her fancy. He listened, love in his eyes, but a sinking at his heart.

Fresh from a high-school education, she displayed her rather superficial acquisitions in all her talk and reflections. Once, in a moment of affectionate interest he asked her for a sampler, for some piece of embroidery with which she might have gained a prize. She had replied with merry laughter:

"A sampler, dear, whoever heard of such a thing nowadays—if you like I'll type you out an essay on the higher development of woman, it was for that I got a prize."

"I don't like type-writers," had been the dry answer. "If people think it worth their while to write at all, they should write with their own hand."

And thus it ever was. Agnes tired too quickly of her father's monosyllabic replies, of his occasional solemn diatribes against her aspirations. As she had floated into his life, so she floated out again, finding her own occupations, drawing her own conclusions, and he rarely attempting to combat her decisions.

At the end of October an impending strike of silk dyers had brought an excitement into the quiet town. In the whirr of the machinery in the mills, Agnes had always found fascination. She would wander for hours round the buildings, listening to the incessant din, counting the pulsations of the engines. But when the doors opened at night, and the white-faced women and girls streamed out from their toil, she would turn swiftly away, as if from infected creatures. Tinging all her imaginations with a romantic glitter, the ugliness of

realities frightened her—she shunned the crudities of common fact. In the dash and stir of a strike there were elements to please her; she chafed to be in the van of the revolt. The local newspapers were scanned eagerly, and on the morning it was announced that the dyers had gone out for a rise in wage, she left the house early, and returned in the afternoon, full of a newly discovered hero and a business engagement.

For some time previously a man nominally from the socialist headquarters in London, had been speaking in the district, and now had taken up his abode in Stoneyard. Agnes had often seen his tall striking form at the railway station, or here and there conferring with the Union leaders, and when she read his advertisement for a type-writing secretary, and recognised that her accomplishments fulfilled his requirements, she knew that this was an outlet for her energy that promised at last sufficient satisfaction.

She met her father's dubious questionings with arguments and persuasions that held more of charm than reason; and he, nursing a latent admiration for her activity, while disapproving of the strike with all the force of his inbred conservatism, was totally unversed in the programme of the agencies which were to keep it alive. Robert Lester was to him only a name, and the girl, quick to perceive that the mechanical, not the personal side of the matter was weighing with him, soon gained her way, took up the work, and was rapidly dominated by it.

With Philip Assheton, from the beginning of their acquaintanceship, she had been at war. His simple, and apparently conventional goodness irritated her. His character presented no surprises, she felt that his opinions were unquestionably sensible and sober, and in effect could bring about only a peace-

making and tiresome result. He took a deep interest in her way of life, and she resented this, and by his undisguised disapproval of her present occupation, the breach between them widened daily.

He found it impossible to make her understand, or even listen to his objections. She, womanlike, trespassing upon her surmise of his affection, imagined jealousy of her independence—of her new friend—as the cause.

His motives at present, however, were without a trace of such feeling, prompted entirely by his concern that no unhealthy or riotous influence should warp a strangely disjointed, yet lovable character. The girl had come to be for him the light of life, and he longed for her growth and perfection with the longing of the idealist.

It was Tuesday morning, three days after the promise had been extracted in Lester's sanctum, and Agnes had done nothing to redeem it. Her intense moods were evanescent, and the thought of her task was no longer horrible, merely obtrusive and teasing.

Ten times a day Assheton passed and re-passed her, but she kept the haughty little tilt of her chin, having as yet devised no dignified means of lowering it. To-day, however, to achieve her conquest, she must make a truce with herself. She refused to consider the possibility of failure for she believed that she held this man in the hollow of her hand. "If I choose," she said to herself, "he would tell me he adored me—if I choose why should he not also compromise with his absurd convictions?"

She was standing now on a small flight of steps in the study, opening books listlessly, to dust them. Her father had gone away for some hours, tempted to a distant town by the announcement of the disposal of an old library. Her mind as usual flitted from point to

point, resting but a moment on her occupation and darting off to abstract speculations of thrilling joys and successes. Through the closed doors she could hear the drone of the boys' voices in the school, the reiteration of the teachers' corrections, and the sharp tap of the cane upon the desk—all the paraphernalia of monotonous education. She paid little attention to the sounds till they suddenly ceased, and looking round she saw the figure of Philip Assheton, passing, darken the window. Then, as if a thought had struck him, he turned and walked into the study.

The sight of him awoke in her a renewed antipathy to her compact with Lester. It was absurd, this desire of his to employ a lieutenant such as Philip Assheton in his manœuvres, and in spite of all explanations, she failed completely to fathom the object of it. Lester, in her calculations, walked so immeasurably above and beyond other men in the town, that she could hardly grasp his notion that it was necessary to prop up his work by outside aid—aid which she considered of so feeble a description.

These ponderings resolved themselves into a general condemnation of Philip's actions; above all of his appearance at this moment. She leapt from the steps, ostensibly to pick up a page of Milton's *Paradise Lost* that had fluttered to the ground, and, without greeting him, looked the young man straight in the face.

"Sorry, Miss Stanier," he said cheerfully, divining her mood, "I want the French dictionary—as you barricade the bookcase will you give it to me?"

"Are your foreign languages so rusty?" she enquired impertinently, without moving.

Philip smiled.

"Certainly, six months in Paris would do me no harm—one is still open to improvement at five and twenty."

"Dear me, what an admission, but I'm afraid the

gayest city in the world would shock you—I'm going there myself some day, but that's a different story."

Philip laughed outright, and showed a set of very white teeth under a fair moustache.

"You're fond of strong colours in your ideas—I don't think Paris, as we shall see it, will do either of us much harm."

She tossed her head.

"If you imagine my life is always to be as dull as you and father try to make it here, you're mistaken. I'm going to enjoy myself, I can tell you."

"I thought you enjoyed yourself now," said Philip gravely. "Moreover, I should hardly call Stoneyard dull just at present."

"No, thank goodness—while Robert Lester is here, there is hope."

Assheton winced—his head was bent over the book, his forefinger running up and down the columns searching for the word.

"I wanted to ask you if you'd heard of that street fight on Saturday night?" he said suddenly. "Challinor and the mixer Milligan from the Upper Mills; it was rather a serious business."

"Heard of it? I saw it," Agnes answered, twisting her duster into knots, and untwisting it again.

"Of course—" Assheton paused. "It's only one of many unfortunate results of this strike. There must be animosity against those men who stood in, they're weakening the position for the others rather; it usually takes this brutally natural expression for itself. Challinor's jaw is smashed to pieces, it's quite possible he may have to go to prison, if he can't pay the fine. They say he was the aggressor."

"Of course he was the aggressor. Do you suppose the other would have had pluck to fight otherwise? I'm sorry for Challinor, but he's suffering in a good cause."

"Yes, that's all very well, but he's got a wife and children and is nearly at the end of his tether. You don't know the amount of real misery there is in the town."

He watched the girl as he spoke, but she made no movement of interest. Only the duster looked now like a white rope as she banged it on the bookshelf.

"I can't see what difference Challinor's broken jaw will make to the strike," she said at last. "That will go on just as far as we choose it to go on—Mr Lester and our party—there's the cottage hospital, if he's not comfortable at home."

"It's very funny, your outlook on these social questions. I could almost describe you as hard-hearted."

"Describe me as anything you like."

Assheton came closer to her; he spoke gently:

"I know you won't listen to me," he said, "but in this case aren't you rather foolish?"

She turned upon him indignantly.

"You've no right to speak to me like this. What can my virtues or vices matter to you? One thing is certain, whatever I may want, or not want to think, it will ever be a contrary thought to yours."

"Ah, don't say that!" he said, "don't say that. If I was playing adviser, it's only because I care."

"I think you're playing at being insolent," she said.

"Insolent to you! that would be impossible. You know what you are to me—how you slip into every thought, every action of my day. I don't want to tell it to you again, to have the best in me frozen with your cutting words, but I can't bear this wretched bickering—these misunderstandings. It's unworthy of you—of my ideal of you—and my ideal is the real thing, thank God, I know it."

He still stood opposite the girl. A pale shaft of sunlight streamed in and lit up her fair young face,

with the quick changing feelings blazing in her eyes.

"I've nothing to answer you," she said, as she moved her head impatiently into shadow; "I wish you'd be sparing with your rhapsodies. We shall be quite good friends some day, when you see things from my point of view; at present you certainly don't. Let's change the subject—I've promised to go to tea with Laurina—will you remind her? Perhaps you may be pleasant by that time. 'Souvent homme varie' is my version of an old proverb."

"You find it very easy to change the subject, but when I think of what you're bringing into your life so heedlessly, I'm in despair," he replied.

Philip spoke gruffly to hide his emotion. He leant against the casement, looking out into the street. A tinker's cart was rolling by, laden with baskets, and the dusky children, seeing his face and recognising a benefactor, ran over the pavement, clamouring for pence. Lost in an effort to calm himself he left their importunities unheeded.

What was the use of arguing with her, she appeared already to ignore his presence; her head buried amongst the shelves, she counted the volumes ostentatiously.

"I'm sorry I said anything," he remarked with forced indifference as he walked across the room, "it's always the same, isn't it?" Then quite unexpectedly and graciously, as he passed her, she looked over her shoulder and smiled at him.

"Going already?" she asked, with a complete change of voice, "Why?"

"Because what is one man's meat is another man's poison," he replied.

With all the anger chased from her face, Agnes stared after him.

"Come back," she cried, "I want to speak to

you." But the door had already slammed upon her words.

"Bother!" she said to herself crossly, relapsing upon the floor amidst a lumber of books, "what a goose I've been—what a goose! There goes my hundred and fifteenth chance."

CHAPTER IV

ARGUMENTS AND AN EXPERIMENT

AFTER a day of gloom and growling, Agnes stood in the middle of the Asshetons' little parlour, her cloak falling from her shoulders, and under the spell of a recent impression, her face aglow with merriment.

"First come, first served, is certainly not the case here," she asserted.

"My dear," said Miss Assheton, "I'm so ashamed of myself, but the Rev. Bass had just left by the garden gate and I never heard the door bell."

"And why, may I ask, am I not to meet the Rev. Bass?"

"Oh, because, you know well enough that you dislike him."

"So would you if you knew him as I did."

"A very worthy man, I assure you—but I wish he would not call on my Browning days. I can't get him to appreciate our king of poets."

"Could he appreciate anything beyond a stuffed turkey and Mr Lawrence's best champagne?"

"It's certainly a pity he's not a temperance man—but he conducts the soup kitchen admirably."

"Oh, Laurina, you're impossible—you'd make excuses for the devil if he wore a surplice. Let's have tea and forget the man."

"Are you really going to honour me for tea?" asked Miss Assheton, as she lit the tall candles on the dresser with a cedar spill.

"Didn't your brother remind you that I was coming?"

"You forget," ventured her hostess gently, and the Wedgwood cups clattered a little as she set them on the table, "how often you say you'll come and don't come. I hardly knew what to expect."

Agnes let this remark pass without comment.

"When will Philip be in, Laurie?" she asked suddenly.

"I don't think he'll be in at all. I know he has an engagement this evening."

Miss Assheton spoke shortly. She had a horror of the girl's criticisms of her brother. This evening, however, there appeared to be none forthcoming. Agnes huddled herself on to a leather foot-stool near the grate, nursing her knees and scraping her feet against the iron bars of the fender. So Philip was not coming home! She was angry with herself and her eyes filled with tears of vexation. She had been foolish and more or less wrong in her attitude towards him in the morning, that she was wise enough to admit; but the retraction and reparation necessary to gain her point were sharp stones to walk over. She had braced herself to step on to them to-night—to get the whole thing over as quickly as possible, and compel him to say yes, and now, after all, he was absent.

The impulse for the effort would be weakened to-morrow. She no longer imagined herself returning triumphant to Lester, but with her old phrase, "I can't, I can't!" running from her lips—and his face would grow hard with contempt and annoyance as he listened to her.

"Where's Philip gone to?" she asked presently.

"I don't know."

"Doesn't he tell you all his plans?"

"Not now," said Miss Assheton sadly—"not always now."

"For what reason? Because of the strike?"

"Well, he knows that my ambitions for his career have been so disappointed, that I find myself unable to take much interest in the social questions of this place," she said. "To my mind Philip is lost to the Church."

"That's very probable," said Agnes dryly.

"You know, dear, I'd always imagined him since a baby, a priest. Only to hear him read the lessons is a treat—every word so beautifully pronounced, every accent on the proper syllable, and he would have looked so dignified in the pulpit. Then a noble career would have been possible for him. There are bishops now at forty. However, I've had to pull down my castles in the air since we've been here."

She sighed as this momentary revival of her faded hopes.

"Tell me something of your life before you came," suggested the girl, with an air of genuine interest.

"My brother was at Balliol and I waited for him at our old home, rejoicing in his great talent and successes," said Miss Assheton, sailing forth joyfully upon her reminiscences. Then we had a little money left us by an uncle, and we went to live in Ireland —far away in the west where the country keeps its own charm and one understands what the poets mean by the hills of dream—Ah! I was happy there—but it wasn't good for Philip, he wanted an active life; so we came to Dublin and he worked in the slums for two years."

She paused, as if hesitating on the brink of a confidence.

Agnes guessed it immediately—

"That was when you wanted him to be a parson, and he wouldn't—isn't it?" she said.

"Yes—Philip was the good Samaritan always. He only thought of binding up wounds and healing

sorrows. He was so true to himself—but it was a great grief when he refused to be ordained."

"Did you want him to come here?"

"No—it seemed as if he were throwing himself back on the road of advancement—it was very distasteful to me; but he found your father interesting, and he thought a year or two's delay would hardly matter—it meant time for reading—so one grew resigned."

"Well, I don't wonder that you consider yourselves buried alive at Stoneyard," came the emphatic rejoinder. "Can't you get him away soon?"

"As long as he thinks himself of use to Mr Stanier," said Laurina despairingly, "nothing will make him go."

"He's not of use to me!" muttered the girl beneath her breath, and she got up restlessly, nearly knocking over the maid, who, with her cap awry, and a look of injury at a sudden order for hot muffins to humour a capricious guest, hurried in with the teapot.

Miss Assheton poured out the hot water, put the sugar in the cups, and forgot her confessions.

"Agnes," she said, "sit down, tea's ready."

But the girl, endeavouring to shake off her depression by an inspection of the room, wandered to and fro.

"I like those prints," she remarked, poking the iron ferrule of her umbrella against the glass of an engraving; "the Battle of the Boyne, isn't it? and Nelson in the cockpit of the *Victory*. What delightful smoky, blood-and-thunder, grand days those were."

"Do come, there's a pet — that umbrella is dangerous."

The girl gave no answer. She had turned her head up, surveying intently a small, dark oil painting over the mantelpiece.

"What an odd woman you are, Laurie, spoiling your delicious series of battle pictures by this daub of the 'Prodigal Son' in the place of honour. I believe it's a sort of salve to your conscience—an emblem of peace and pardon—amidst so much carnage."

"It's a very precious picture to me," replied Miss Assheton gravely, ignoring the raillery, "and a valuable copy of the famous Murillo."

"Hum!"—Agnes had approached the tea-table at last, and covered her plate with a slice of bread and several spoonfuls of apricot jam—"with all due deference to Murillo, I think the parable of the Prodigal Son is the most unreal of all the parables in the Bible."

"Agnes!" the tone was expressive.

"Yes, don't faint!" mimicked the incorrigible with her mouth full. "I really mean it. The Prodigal Son was a very natural sort of person till he became frightened and mean. It always strikes me that the father was weak and unfair about him—considering what his real opinions were."

Miss Assheton raised her hand deprecatingly. "I wish you wouldn't talk so irresponsibly—you really pain me. It's quite right to say honestly what one thinks, but it's not right to lead people to believe that you don't think at all. There's a danger of such straightforwardness being mistaken for silliness."

"If you're going to be severe, Laurie, I simply can't stand it—it doesn't suit you. Pass me the cake, and I'll try and explain myself."

The girl's pretty candid air was disarming. Miss Assheton resolved that she would be gentle in her disagreement.

"The Prodigal Son," continued Agnes, picking candied peel out of her cake, and aiming it at a sleepy puppy in the armchair, "was a poltroon. He wanted to eat his cake and have it. He did eat

his cake, and I really think he was right to do so, but when he went back snivelling and said he was sorry, it's no wonder that he upset everyone."

Miss Assheton looked aghast.

"I don't think you mean to be profane," she said; "profanity is the stamp of a second-rate mind, and you're not second-rate, but the parable, as you know, has a very beautiful meaning. It's been of the greatest comfort to hundreds of sad and sinful souls."

Agnes shook her head.

"It may be beautiful and comforting to some people—but I don't see how it can be—it isn't like life a bit. People who live like the Prodigal Son, generally die as they live. If they spend the portion of their goods right up, and enjoy themselves, what more can they expect at the end? Anyway they rarely get anything!"

"But," said Miss Assheton, "your view of the story is absolutely distorted. You talk as if this life were all."

"All," cried Agnes. "All! I want it to be all, now, while I'm young and strong—and—and pretty, I don't want to be vain, Laurie, but I feel I'm pretty—when I'm old and worn out, I'll pay the price for it willingly. I shall never say I'm sorry—I shall never regret anything I've enjoyed, even," she added with a laugh, "if I have to go without the robe and the golden ring."

Her voice trembled a little. In the longing in it there was a certain piteousness.

Laurina Assheton looked at her imploringly.

"My dear, my dear!" she said, "I'm frightened for you. Your notion of happiness is so tangible—so material. Happiness is in nothing that we hold; in a sense it has always been nameless, but its own most real expression to us here and now, is peace. It has always been a puzzle to me that

so few people understand happiness—so few treasure its fulfilment in peace."

"Peace!" said Agnes, "peace—I don't want peace, and happiness is real, don't tell me it isn't real—you don't understand—you lead such a narrow life."

"But, my child, we all have our ideals."

"Ideals. I've ideals too. I don't think they're yours. I'm going to make my motto 'ni regret du passé, ni peur de l'avenir.' I shan't always be attaining—I shall get what I want."

The girl spoke quickly, as if afraid of her own words, and looked up with a smile of defiance at her friend.

"You're like a happy child with its birthday toys. Shall I try to break them for you? With all my heart I want you to be satisfied."

"How tiresome you are! I am satisfied—trust me, I'm going to be satisfied always," and Agnes, pushing her plate from her, gazed moodily into the shadowy room, lit only by the flame of the tall candles, the flicker of the fire-light.

It was an attractive little place, full of tasteful bits of old furniture and china; the books in rare bindings giving almost a brilliant look to the shelves in the dingy worm-eaten wainscot that reached up to the white-washed beams of the low ceiling. Everything looked spotlessly clean and sweet, from the china pot-pourri jar that sat on the ledge below the Chippendale clock, to the lady at the head of the tea-table, with the kindly eyes and mouth, and the soft clear skin under the lace lappet that adorned the smoothly braided fair hair—hair already slightly streaked with grey.

Agnes was lost in a train of thought—her gaze was unobservant of her surroundings. She spoke again suddenly.

"Have you ever had a past of your own, Laurina?"

Miss Assheton smiled a little sadly.

"All my past that was of any use, I have moulded into my present—all my memories are in those little household gods — my pictures, my china and my books. But my life is in my big household god."

"I suppose you mean Philip?"

"Does she? foolish person," a man's cheery voice chimed in.

Agnes looked up. Philip Assheton was in the room. So he had come, after all. A note of triumph sounded in her heart that he had not been able to keep away from her. In silent greeting she held out her hand, and watched the sister with the brother as she took his ulster and his papers with a smiling face. "How she loves him!" the girl thought. "I wonder why?"

Philip laid his hat on the sideboard and smoothing his ruffled hair with a handkerchief, came up to the table. He glanced at Agnes with some hesitation, but she met his look frankly. It was evident that for the moment she wished him to take her as she was — to be forgetful of recent differences.

"You weren't expected," she said.

"Nothing so pleasant as a surprise," he laughed. "Still you both seem rather subdued. I hope it's not due to my arrival? What are you talking about?"

"Laurie has as usual been moralizing; I demoralizing, that's all."

"Demoralizing Laurie! what a Herculean task. May I ask under what rôle you are attempting this exertion—as a socialist?"

Agnes was determined to be agreeable.

"Laurie refuses to agree that I'm an idealist."

"That," replied Assheton, "is very short-sighted of her."

"I've always thought there are idealists and idealists—aren't there, Mr Assheton?"

"Possibly," said Philip, emptying his teacup: even as there are socialists and socialists!"

Agnes challenged the quizzical grey eyes.

"I can't agree to any definitions in socialism," she said: "it's an ideal with only one path to reach it."

"Excuse me, there are several, in fact a perfect labyrinth of paths. People ignore this: socialism is a large word which covers much. You who take a single view of the truth, hold an unsteady balance. I'm afraid you'll find socialism, as you write it, a very unsatisfactory ideal."

"I thought you were a socialist," retorted Agnes.

"That's what I'm called here, because I believe in progress, but to your socialism—a third cousin once removed," he said. "I prefer not to throw my cap over the windmill. I can't do without my old faith in God in heaven, and God in man, even if I accept the abolition of private property and the nationalisation of railways; in fact I'm altogether too orthodox for you."

"Of course one believes in God, I mean a sort of spirit, which is the same thing, but Christianity—old-fashioned Bible Christianity—is utterly behind the times," said Agnes boldly.

"Then why shouldn't we adapt it to the times, instead of cutting ourselves adrift from it altogether, to swirl in a wretched maelstrom of doubt."

"There's no happiness without God," added Laurina Assheton gently.

Agnes suppressed a yawn.

"I don't think I suffer much from doubt," she said; "things explain themselves. When I'm fifty I shouldn't be astonished if I think like you, Laurie."

Philip looked at her gravely. "I wonder!" he said; then he continued, "I daresay after all you'll leave us—the stick-in-the-muds—far behind. I shall

see you fizzing along in a motor car, scattering dynamite bombs, with all the unemployed hanging on behind. I only hope it won't run away with you—those things do sometimes."

"I wish you'd be serious," said Agnes impatiently. "You never seem able to discuss these things seriously with me, or to think it worth while to explain your point of view properly."

"Are *you* serious?" said Philip quietly. "Tell me."

He was sitting on the edge of the table, leaning forward, with his hands between his knees, as he put this question to the girl. She had moved to the footstool again, her shoulders pressed against the fender.

Looking back at him, she recognised involuntarily what she had always striven to ignore, the strength and power of his intellectual face, the character and distinction of his whole figure. "He's ugly," she had reiterated vehemently, when people praised him. To-night she knew that he was not. Instinctively her mood softened. A new interest floated into the purpose of her amiability. It would be worth while, this coming victory, after all. If he still remembered the morning's passage of arms—and she suspected that he did remember it—he should forget it. Her imagination ran riot into the future. She became possessed by a tremor of anticipation, her crowding fancies lost themselves in a flight of possibilities.

"Serious," she said with a radiant smile; "I'm absolutely so; there's such a lot I'd like to talk over with you, such a heap I want to ask you. But you needn't preach sermons, you know. You're rather fond of that. Who is the critic who says he can't bear religion in novels—it's much worse in real life, when people talk about it—it takes all the romance out of things."

"I won't preach," he answered eagerly, no longer

on the defensive, "but my gladness is to help you always if you would let me, and to teach you anything I could."

Agnes shook her head.

"No, please don't teach me. I should find your treatise on 'The Perfect Way' just as incomprehensible as Mr Burgoyne finds Browning."

Philip laughed.

"About Browning my sister is incorrigible, but I look upon it as an aberration. Newman and Christina Rossetti are so much more in her line—aren't they, Laurie?"

"Miss Assheton was putting away the sugar and the apricot jam in the cupboard.

"What, dear?" she said.

Agnes raised her voice mischievously. "Come here, while I tell you that Browning was a fraud."

"I shall look upon it as blasphemy if you abuse our poet of incomparable power," remonstrated Miss Assheton, still holding the handle of the cupboard door. "A fraud, indeed! Browning was one of the great saviours of society."

"Well, I don't know about a saviour, he certainly was a slave to society. He used to go to so many dinners and parties in the London season, people thought he slept in his evening clothes. Yet in that unintelligible way of his, he was always writing about wrongs and injustices."

"And he felt wrongs and injustices," Philip interposed; "no one more so. Believe me, Miss Stanier, you're wrong to chain your mind to details in these questions. We deal with great principles, wide theories. If Browning chose to study character in Belgravia, we're the gainers, not the losers."

"But," she persisted, "if people set themselves up for being prophets, they should be recognised as prophets."

"What! go to dinner in a shooting coat and carpet slippers?"

"Yes," said the girl, "why not—lots of our social reformers do—it shows they have the pluck to be unconventional."

"It shows they have petty minds, and unbounded conceit to cavil at clean and harmless customs," replied Philip warmly.

"I see no conceit in carpet slippers," objected Agnes.

"Simply because in your impulsiveness and inexperience, you look for no motives in actions, because you gauge people by what they seem, not by what they are. Oh, don't think you're exceptional in this, most people do."

He spoke bitterly, and Agnes flushed, for she thought his words held some veiled recrimination. She had some difficulty in restraining a stinging answer, but self-control just now was essential.

"I'm afraid you think my ideas very superficial, and that I'm a shocking imposition altogether," she said at last, quite meekly.

"No,—no, it's not that, but it seems to me that you talk and act irresponsibly. That you have yet to learn to carry the balance of life's scales evenly, and be patient. Good times are coming, but the mills of God grind slowly, and in His process of evolution we can't sweep away as we would, we can only transform as He wills. People tell you, don't they, that equality and liberty without superior government and without spiritual beliefs will bring happiness to all the world. Believe me, that not even socialism written in your golden letters on every man's heart can solve the great riddle of our existence."

"For a man of faith," said Agnes pertly, "you're singularly unconvincing. Are you going to cry down happiness, like your sister? I think it the best thing for everyone."

"Ah, so do I, so do I, but socialism isn't happiness. It's merely a fresh machine to try and manufacture it. You musn't mix up cause and effect, Miss Stanier."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that in a time like this, all stir and excitement, you don't trouble to look under the surface of things—you live upon your emotions and dream that this strike is to bring elysium to all the workers in Stoneyard. Probably within a week's time," he added sarcastically, "if the dyers get their rise."

"Oh, you may laugh—but I believe all that I wish is coming true."

"You're wrong then, because it's not. Behind your socialistic views, as well as behind much of our politics and philanthropies, is the egoism which rots everything. You don't mean to tell me that Lester, who fills your mind with these imaginations, is working for anything but his own ends. If I thought he'd an earnest thought in him, it might make a difference, but he curses God and his fellows by turn, as it suits his purpose. He doesn't know what to be at."

"It's untrue, untrue!" Agnes burst forth, taking up the cudgels in her friend's defence. "Mr Lester's working for the same cause that you are, why don't you understand him? What's his programme?" she went on more quietly; "the down-treading of the oppressor, the restoration to the people of what has been taken from them unjustly—the love of brother for brother. Isn't that what you want?"

She laid her hand upon the table, stretching it towards Philip, and he, lowering his eyes from her keen, questioning blue ones, for a second let his fingers touch it.

"Certainly, that's what I want," he said slowly; "but not simply in words. Do you remember just

now I said there were socialists and socialists? That's just it. Whatever you may say, I feel that Lester is one sort of reformer and I'm another. You may shrug your shoulders," as Agnes made a little movement of disdain, "but I believe in the good in mankind, as much as he disbelieves in it; I want to work through it, and he against it; he wants to pull down, I to weld together. He thinks himself economically sound, and he thinks me—ah, what does it matter what he thinks? I'm tired of being argumentative, tired of laying down the law. You've been so patient, get up from that footstool and tell me I'm not an impossible bore."

He stretched out his arms to help her, glad of the pretext for clasping her soft fingers.

"You must allow," said Agnes, standing beside him now, and unwilling to leave the subject, "that you misunderstand Mr Lester."

"He doesn't give me a chance to understand him," said Assheton, taking out his watch. "I wonder where Laurie has escaped to?"

But Agnes, feeling the ice giving way between them, clung to the conversation.

"We're only just beginning our talk. As I said before——"

Philip interrupted her.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Stanier; I expect you'll think me rude, but I've got an appointment which I must keep—down at Challinor's house. I want to see him — and one or two other men are to meet me there. I can't fail them, you see. It's a bore to have to go, for you've been very nice to me this evening." He leant towards her with a grateful look.

Agnes ignored his compliment. She had been coming rapidly to a decision.

"An appointment in the slums," she said; "that sounds important. Can I go with you? Once you

said I ought to know more of these poor people and their lives, and for some stupid reason I objected. To-night I really want to go."

"To-night!" Philip stared at her. The girl had been puzzling him all the evening, but never so much as by this inconvenient request.

His hesitation fixed her in her resolve.

"Why not to-night? It's not late, and one gets a better insight into their homes when one comes unexpectedly. Don't prevent me!" She turned her head away, but her voice was determined.

Philip delayed in answering. His business was about the strike. He counted upon circumstances to-night, that would tend to put a spoke in Lester's wheel of mischief, and the awkwardness of the situation annoyed him.

"You know, Miss Stanier, you really are rather changeable," he said at last. "You always tell me you loathe poor people's houses and dirty children. You've no idea what you're letting yourself in for—a wretched home, a sick man, probably in bed—you've told me that sick people in bed are your abhorrence—and an odious wife—Mrs Challinor has no manners. Taking into consideration that we shall have a bitterly cold walk into the bargain, are you truly in earnest?"

The girl had been beating a tattoo with her foot upon the floor during this dissuasion.

"Truly in earnest!" she said sharply; "why should you put me off? Are you afraid of my hearing what you have to say to these men, of my disgracing myself in some fashion? It's ridiculous to wish to make me do a thing one day, and then hold me back from doing it another—is that what you call teaching me?"

She turned and looked Philip full in the face.

"I want to go, Mr Assheton, do you hear?"

"Then come," he said, taking up his hat.

CHAPTER V

HER REQUEST

THE snow was on the ground, hard, crisp snow, and the night was moonless. From time to time over the star-lit sky a wintry cloud would float in the light east wind, and pass, making the blue-blackness of the heavens appear more luminous than before.

A few people hurried with quick footsteps here and there, hands thrust in their pockets and collars high about their ears, but no one turned to look at Assheton and his companion as they walked briskly up the lamp-lit street, and turned into the byways of the town.

From time to time one or the other of them let fall a short remark, to be followed by a monosyllabic reply—but for the most part they were silent. To them the situation was so unusual. Assheton felt this strange new mood of the girl's still a matter of bewilderment, and even while he accepted it gladly, in the background of his mind rose a certain indefiniteness about it—as if it held no meaning—as if she had let him grasp a shadow, even as he reached after herself.

To her, as she strode light-heartedly beside him, there was less complexity in the matter. Her thoughts alternated between excitement at the novelty of her occupation, and self-complacency at having, with so little trouble, travelled far along the road of her desires.

As they turned the corner by Lester's house, she

looked up—a light burned in one of the windows of the study. He had come back then, she concluded, with a little thrill of satisfaction. To-morrow she would go to him and tell him of her message delivered, and bring him the acceptable answer. The importance of her task magnified itself. In imagination she heard the warmth of Lester's thanks; in his new confidence in her as an ally, he would draw her more and more into the planning of his schemes. Soon it would be no longer the typewriter and the woman, but the woman first, with her whole soul at the service of a great cause, and the typewriter to work her will, not his alone.

The glow of these thoughts warmed her blood; it tingled to the tips of her fingers.

When Assheton asked her, as the east wind swept icily up the street, if she were cold, she only laughed.

"Cold?" she said; "it's delicious," and she drew closer to him.

The street lamps dwindled in number, soon the pavement stopped abruptly.

Assheton helped the girl over a rutty, snow-filled portion of the road.

"Another twenty yards, and we shall be there," he said. "I'm already repenting my weakness. Your feet will be horribly cold, and I don't think you'll be amused."

"Moreover I'm very much in the way?"

"Please don't take that into consideration."

"Decidedly I don't repent having come, at least not at present. I expect you know just how to speak to these sort of people—that'll be something for me to profit by."

She leant confidingly on his arm and they plunged through the fresh snow drifts, and brushed along the outline of the squalid cottages. These lay in darkness and silence—some beneath the ill-fitting doors showed a gleam of light.

At one of these they paused, and Assheton knocked.

A sound of grumbling within, a pattering and a scraping of wooden chairs pushed back upon a brick floor, and very slowly the door was shaken half open, and a woman peered out. She held up a tallow dip, which was promptly extinguished by the draught.

"It's only I, Mrs Challinor," he said. "I told you I'd come down to see your husband; I hope he's beginning to mend." Then as the woman looked beyond him at the girl, he added; "you wont mind my having brought Miss Stanier with me; she saw your husband hurt in the fight, and is awfully sorry about it."

Assheton spoke easily and pleasantly, but walked with determination through the doorway into the dimly lit kitchen. Agnes gave him a little pinch of amusement, and followed closely upon his heels.

The woman pushed the door violently to again, without speaking.

"Haven't Webb and Bickerton come yet?" asked Assheton, turning down the collar of his overcoat.

With a discouraging shake of her head, Mrs Challinor wandered from her visitors, and bent over the kettle.

"I 'avna sane none on 'em," she said curtly.

It was a cool reception, and Agnes could not restrain a shiver of disgust. Scarcely to herself had she allowed how physically distasteful, obtrusive poverty, ugliness, or ill-health were to her, yet, as she looked from corner to corner of the kitchen, she could rouse herself to no appreciation, no pity even. Round her ankles her damp skirt hung limply, little pools of water gathered from the melting snow upon her feet, and the chill from them seemed to creep into her heart and freeze her enthusiasms and sympathies. Two children on a pallet in the corner sat up and eyed her with curiosity, then looked at each other grimacing sheepishly the while. A man

in a wooden armchair near the fire, his head tied in innumerable bandages, moved his legs restlessly under a patchwork cotton quilt, which had apparently been spread over his knees for warmth, and was serving its purpose badly. She noticed he gave Assheton a grateful glance of recognition as he approached him.

"How are you to-night, Challinor?"—he had taken the thin hand in a friendly clasp. "It's a bad job, isn't it? But you're getting on, and I'm not going to lecture you, as you can't answer me. When the others come I want a bit of a talk with you. I believe things are looking better all round, if only you men will be sensible."

Assheton leant, with his back to the girl, against the edge of the broken-down four-post bed which filled half the room. As he spoke he felt instinctively how distasteful his words would be to her, how she would sit there all the evening silently disapproving and condemning, even if she did nothing worse. This disagreeable knowledge but whetted his courage. He was convinced that his task to-night was for good; that in spite of everything it must be carried through, even at the risk of losing her new found friendliness, of starting a stronger opposition than before.

"You know," he went on, addressing the invalid "I've been pegging away at the question for weeks. This morning I saw Mr Lawrence and Mr Hobson. They spoke quite sensibly about the position—they deplore it as much as I do—but it's a ticklish time in the silk trade for employers and employed. It's the old curse of foreign competition. I know you believe, and those who lead you believe, that that's no reason why your wages should be lowered; but until economic changes in the industrial world are sufficiently drastic all round to support this theory, I don't know where it will land us. I wish in the

present instance masters and men weren't being pushed farther apart by the misrepresentations of unscrupulous agitators."

With a quick flash of her dull eyes Mrs Challinor looked up.

"It's toime th' good cum'd then. Nought bu' 'alf a loaf i' th' cupboard an' seven on us i' th' heawse welly starven. Mester Brown fro' th' chapil caw'd here jest neaw to say, 'Dick,' 'e says, 'dunna they fret theysen, lad, th' Lord 'ull provide!' Sames ter mey as the Lord 'ull provide fur us i' th' Bastile fore th' wick end if th' men dunna goo ter work agen."

"Are the funds of the Union very low?" asked Assheton.

The woman moved her shoulders wearily.

"I kneaw nowt abart th' funds o' th' Union. Theere's no brass cum'd 'ere this threy week' an' nöone loikly fert' cum neawther, an Nallie theere welly as bad as her faythe r: an' mey loikly to be fast afore th' month's eawt."

Agnes listening, looked away into the gloom of the corner. A slip of a girl sat sewing there; from time to time she coughed violently. When the flames leapt up they showed a strained look on the colourless face, as if its expression was stunned by some constant noise. Agnes knitted her forehead, almost praying for the tears to come, for some feeling of sisterliness to rise up towards these people, whose need was so apparent. As she watched the mechanical movement of the slender hands, she was frightened by her own hardness.

At that moment Philip turned, and she caught the expression of his eyes. Undoubtedly he would like her to go and speak to this girl; yet even as she guessed his wish, she felt obstinately that she had no words to give, that the very cough unaccountably annoyed her.

Assheton leant across.

"You see how things are," he said earnestly; "it's horrible, isn't it? In the depth of winter, too. I assure you this family was in fairly comfortable circumstances. Most of the strikers' homes are worse than this; one can't keep them all going. More and more am I persuaded how weak this Union is —how ineffectual the strike."

"Then why isn't the Union better organised?" blurted out the girl, feeling herself on surer ground. "Mr Lester always says it's a weak Union. He talks of the ignorant lot of wage-earners, and the pack of capitalists and idealists who play the mischief with them—he's perfectly right."

"Yes, I suppose the whole thing appears like that to Lester; he doesn't care a brass farthing for the starving individuals — the mothers, the children. They only clog the machinery with which he is concerned. If it isn't worked his way it must be smashed to pieces, and there's an end of it."

"We're dealing with a class, not with individuals," started Agnes decidedly, but in the middle of her sentence the door began to shake and creak again. Challinor lifted his bandaged head expectantly, and the woman gave an impatient exclamation.

Two men stepped into the cottage. With a nod to right and left of them, they kicked the snow off their boots, and sat down without further ceremony on the far end of the settle where Agnes had already established herself.

They were both of a type—short, thick-set and unhealthy looking. Bickerton had trimmed his black beard; Webb, a much younger man, with a check scarf twisted round his collarless neck, looked as if he had had his last shave the previous week.

Assheton returned their greeting.

"I was afraid you couldn't get down," he said; "it's rather late."

"Bin oop t' Lester's," and Webb spat into the fire.

"Then perhaps you know already what I'm about to tell you—that I've seen two of the masters, and that if you show them a fair spirit, they'll probably come to a compromise. With all my heart I hope you'll accept their offer."

Bickerton shook his head.

"I' avna heerd nowt abart mekkin et oop: we're goin' to hev tow shillin' a wick a' rawnd or nowt."

Agnes, her cheeks rather flushed, drew herself up from her lounging position, recognizing a confederate. She had begun to feel rather bored with the evening's diversion; Challinor was all very well as a combatant, but as a silent onlooker distinctly tiresome; now some excitement was creeping into the situation.

Assheton kept his head bent—from one hand to the other he tossed a bunch of keys.

"So you agreed to stick to it," he said quietly. "Have you thought it all out for yourselves, what it means, this sticking to it? You've hardly any funds to go on with, and certainly outside contributions won't last for ever. The thing I mind most, is that it reflects upon your fellow workmen in other branches of the trade. People, I'm told, can do without the Stoneyard dyes now. The dye works will be closed for good and all; where are you going to start again?"

There was no reply. As if for guidance the men looked simultaneously towards Challinor sitting near the hearth. His bright eyes flashed back at them a sort of mute appeal that seemed to urge them to something about which they felt uncertain. His thin moist hands kept sliding up and down over the knobs of the arms of his chair.

"Don't think I'm hard on you," continued Assheton, as they still made no answer. "I revolt altogether

at the terms of your present work ; not so much against the actual wages, as at the whole of the conditions. But this unreasonable hot-headed action of yours can't advance things for you—economic problems are being worked out slowly and surely by wiser heads in the country. At least allow that things are better than they were fifty years ago. So sure am I that things *will* be better than they are to-day. What's this insane strike bringing ? "

" Et inna bringin' mooch bafe an' plum pudden," said Webb with a grin.

" It's bringing strife and discord, it's increasing class hatred, it's ruining your trade, it's causing brawls like the one that has disfigured your friend, and is holding imprisonment over him. You tell me you fight for your rights, but who will give them to you while you are so unreasonable. Where's your independence, when you have to be fed by charity ? When the very people you're rising against are keeping you alive ? "

" Et's o' varry well fo' they to goo tawkin' on, Mester," said Bickerton stubbornly. " We'er stickin' t'gether an' goin' t' obey orders."

" Orders, what orders ? " Assheton replied warmly ; " it seems strange that your trade unionism can't stand on its own merits, and its own decisions, without crying out for the support and approval of every agitating party in the country. You know well enough that till this town was taken possession of by strangers, who talked arrant rot to you, and had only their own ends to serve, that the whole question might have been settled in a day or two by arbitration, that there was no necessity for the strike at all."

The tabby cat had jumped on to Agnes's lap. As it lay purring, her fingers buried in its soft fur, she could, in the tension of this moment, have strangled it. " It's Lester—Lester—Lester, ringing through that," she said to herself. " How he hates

him! I wonder these fools don't see how personal it all is. I hope they won't give way, no, not one little inch." As if divining the challenge in her mind, Philip took it up in his next words.

"Not that I blame you men—heaven forbid! All my sympathies are with you, and if it were in my power to get you to be content with half a victory, instead of a crushing defeat, I would. The state of things now is miserable, and it is the agitators who come down here and blind you with false issues, who are the miscreants. Believe me," he went on, "you are honest and brave, you must be brave to stand all you are standing, can't you settle the matter for yourselves, can't you use your own judgment without prejudice from outside? I wish I could be of some good to you."

There rang in his voice the tone of earnest sincerity, of inspiring faith in the best, that was the very key-note of his character. He had masked his sympathy with the passion of his words, but that his sympathy was there full, pure, utterly disinterested, any unbiassed listener could have told in a moment. It struck sparks at last in the men before him.

"It do same above a bit rough, that weyne gettin' aw th' kicks an' theyne gettin' th' 'apence as yoo sey. I canna sey fer th' loife on mey th' end on it. Which Mesters didst say was a gooin' fer t' offer owt?"

"Hobson and Lawrence; I'm not sure of Arrowsmith and Cook, but if I thought there was any chance of bringing you dyers round I think I might do more with them. I'm so frightened of a delay," he continued eagerly. "Couldn't you face the position now at once."

"An' what fer would et bey?"

"An advance of a shilling all round is a fair proposal, if it's not quite what you want."

The men looked from one to the other.

"Weel I shanna sey as wey shan aw stand eawt

abaut that. It isna as if it wasna summat loike," said Bickerton. "They dostna think may 'appen as if wey stickin' t'gether they'ne gie us aw on it?"

"I'm sure they won't, and wouldn't it be better to go in of your own will on that, than to be compelled to go in on the old wage? Will you talk to your men about it?"

"I wunna sey as wey wunna sey summat abart et t'morrow neet at t' lodge mateing, but they wunna agree aw at wonce. Ay, lad, that there Lester wull bey makkin' a foine mess on us agen: he's a desperate dale stronger nor wey are and weyn bin' messed wi' him a'ready."

During those minutes' conversation, there had come to Agnes a revelation of the futility of her mission, a sudden realization of the hopelessness of her diplomacy. Between Lester and Assheton the gulf was impassable; it would yawn bridgeless for ever. With this knowledge rose a revulsion of feeling, a horror of her surroundings. She felt like a prisoner in an enemy's camp, whilst her captain's motives and actions were being trampled in the dust before her; she fancied invisible chains were dragging her far away from Lester, from all with which she associated him. Her self-command weakened, and she was glad of it. She would speak now, cost what it might.

With a quick exclamation of anger, she sprang to her feet, stumbling a little over the sleepy cat as it rolled from her lap, and shook itself from her.

"Cowards!" she cried passionately. "Cowards! you are just like driven cattle, one way then and the other way now. Why do you play false to the best leader that men ever had? Why do you try and throw Mr Lester over, because someone else dares to tell you he's wrong? He's right, I say. The only way by which you'll ever get freedom, is

by fighting for it. Are you going to haul down the flag of liberty?"

Her clap-trap appeal might have been effective at a mass meeting; it fell painfully flat in this poor cottage. Mrs Challinor turned her head slowly; the steam from the kettle curled about her tired face; the men stared open-mouthed; Assheton, flushed and nervous, caught her hand.

"For heaven's sake, sit down, Miss Stanier," he said, lowering his voice; "They won't understand just now, you see they don't all know who you are —and—"

"What does it matter who I am?" Agnes interrupted, snatching her hand from his grasp. "Why should I sit down? Why shouldn't they understand what I say, as well as what you say? It's absurd that they should give up what we've been toiling two months for, just because in five minutes you tell them they're mistaken."

"Don't your theories blush at these facts?" he suggested gravely. Involuntarily her gaze followed his round the kitchen, half-furnished and forlorn, in its captivity to want. The wind swept down the chimney in occasional gusts, as if to give encouragement to the girl's wrath, and drove the ashes over the hearth. The children, uninterested, even in such a situation, huddled listlessly together.

One of the men guffawed, as Mrs Challinor, throwing a couple of potatoes into the boiling water in the pot, still fixed the girl, her head thrust forward.

"Astna thay got nowt fur t' sey abart it, missus?" he asked, with a wink at his friend.

The woman rose at his challenge and walked forward. So small and insignificant—her eyes sunk in pallid cheeks—the only touch to remind one of a long lost youth in a coil of bright brown hair pinned untidily round her head.

She dragged at Agnes by the arm.

"Sit thay dain, Mess, sit thay dain. Dunna tak the 'ope from us, as they'n taen t' bread from our marths. Yew arena t' mither uv a family. It's folks saime as yew as torks an' dinna knoaw, and folkes saime's mey as 'as fer t' knoaw and canna tork. Bu' Oi'm fur torking now, for Oi can tork to a wench better than Oi can to a mon, Oi've 'ad my schoolin' an' coortin' deys too, an' its nowt but th' work that's brought mey ter wat Oi am, bu' yew dunna know th' best o' the work, tin there's no work fur t' du."

She looked pitifully round, and the girl, stilled by the unexpected attack, stood doggedly silent.

"It's thayse fancy wimses thay'n gotten as maks things wuss. Oi sez ter our Dick, 'Dick, wi' scrattin' an' scrapin' Oi can du wi' seventain shullin' a wick, but oi canna du wi' nowt.' But wen Dick's art aaf th' noights an' rades they paipers and bukes loik aw day," she pointed to a heap of old newspapers and pamphlets on the bed, "and sez it's aw for t' Gran' Cause, my 'art's just welly broke. 'Wat good dun it du uz?' sez I. 'Good fur th' childer,' 'e sez, 'w'en they'n growd up.' But thay never wan be growd up wi'out mait nor milk, nor anythin' else fur t' give 'em t' eat."

For want of breath she paused in her feverish declamation, and leant heavily against the table, her arms falling limply to her sides. For a second a pin might have been heard to drop in the room. Then the men burst forth into mock applause, which could not drown the paroxysm of coughing from the girl in the corner. A child sleeping in the cradle began to wake and wail; on the hob the unwatched kettle boiled over and sputtered into the fire. The pathos of the moment was gone, the cottage became a pandemonium of jarring noises. Agnes seeing that no clay was here for her moulding, that no outburst of condemnation could be effectual, felt that her only resource was flight.

"Let me go," she cried, pushing past the woman and stepping over the men's outstretched legs; "let me go instantly. I can't stay another minute—it's perfectly awful." Unheeding if Assheton followed her or not, she wrenched at the stubborn door till it opened, and hurrying into the night, went swiftly towards the town. As she walked, the rising wind blew her damp skirts round her legs and tossed the wisps of hair into her eyes.

Assheton, who had stayed for a last word, had difficulty in overtaking her and matching his pace to hers, as she fought against the gusts, panting her way up the hill. Then, as the light and life of the town streets came in sight, he stopped, and forced her to face him.

"You are angry with me," he said. "I told you how it would be; why did you ever come? Am I in for eternal reproaches?"

"Don't!" she answered. "It's all so horrible—so horrible! Not that I expected anything else from you or from them. Don't wait, come on, it's so cold; I want to forget, I want to forget, terribly."

"Why should you forget?" said Assheton, as they walked faster. "It might all be different, that's the worst of it."

"Yet I can hear you tell them that their lot in life is for the best; that they're making idiots of themselves to revolt against it."

"I don't think I said that," he said.

"What did you say then?" she went on, indignantly, "except to show them that we're divided one against another in everything; that you're doing your best to prevent them from getting the help we want to bring them."

"Because you might as well try and carry water in a sieve as try and help them in the way you and Lester are working. I can hardly see through the gloom of these industrial problems. Turn where

you will, impossible barriers are raised by those who unfortunately have all the power in their hands. If they could only be broken down by the strength of a truer Christianity."

"Ah!" cried the girl, "it's always Christianity with you—you're so abstract."

"Why? What other power exists to cleanse the selfishness, the materialism, of this generation? but lost in their dogmas and views, how few of our so-called reformers understand it," he added despairingly; "how few!"

He turned his face up to the stars as he spoke, as if he would read more clearly into the unknown.

"Religion is a safe haven to talk from," she answered, with a sneer, "when one's afraid."

"Afraid? afraid of what?"

"Yes, afraid. You know you're afraid of active measures; you wouldn't be seen on the same platform as Mr Lester for all the world, though you profess to hate the same things."

"You're illogical. Why should I be seen with him? We may profess to hate the same things, but we don't fight against them with the same weapons. Don't let me turn a successful meeting of his into a bear-garden—Lester wouldn't bless me."

Half-an-hour ago it had flashed into Agnes's mind the inevitable futility of her mission. When they came seriously to close quarters her diplomacy seemed lost upon Philip—he eluded her. By her action in the cottage she had cast discretion to the winds, yet she still remembered that the request must be put to-night or not at all, and that in putting it hopefully she tested her vaunted influence over Assheton. Tired and sick at heart, a certain numbness had fallen upon this sense of power, it needed a double-handed grasp upon her courage to attack the matter, when all her being cried out to let it pass.

They were under the shelter of the houses and

shops now. In a sudden impulse she turned and faced Philip, as he had turned and faced her a few minutes before.

"Why do you say that Mr Lester wouldn't bless you? As a matter of fact he knows all about you—he appreciates your work." She paused, but Assheton was silent, and her ardour grew as she continued; "Haven't I tried to be nice this evening—haven't I done the thing you always wanted me to do? If I was cross in that cottage and made a mess of things, I'm sorry—forgive me about it—those people were so aggravating."

"And I, insupportable," he remarked at last—"well?"

"Well, will you do what I ask now, will you go and speak at one of Mr Lester's meetings? He usually has them in the big room at the 'Bird in Hand,' but for you he'd arrange it at the Labour Church, or if it was fine in the Market Square. You know he doesn't want you to tie yourself down to any special doctrines. I daresay he'd agree with some of your suggestions, for he knows that at heart you are in sympathy with us—to all intents and purposes we're working for the same thing. I'm sure it will be the greatest help if you will speak; you won't refuse me, will you?"

She knew that her explanation was of the clumsiest, but what could she add to it? She was silenced now by the change in Assheton's expression.

Expectancy, incredulity, conviction, and then one overwhelming look of pain succeeded each other, and now only the pain remained. He had hardly heeded the words she spoke; he was watching her eyes, her lips, her face, into which, in her despairing knowledge of coming failure, had been thrown all the desire of her heart.

So for a moment, they stood speechless. A cart bumped and rattled by in the snow, a drunken

man came out of the public-house, and lurched down the opposite pavement carolling—otherwise the town seemed deserted. Overhead the flicker of the gas-lamp gave a spectral look to their wan faces, daubing them with dark shadows.

To her there seemed nothing more to say; a sudden shame possessed her, and a sudden fear.

"Did Lester tell you to make that request?" Assheton asked at length, still with his eyes upon her.

"Yes."

"And"—he went on coldly, "you arranged with him the most diplomatic form in which to put it, the most convenient time to bring it about—is that so?"

Agnes cast about mentally for her usual ease of manner, for the ready, biting retorts, to meet this unexpected turn in events, but she felt deplorably at a loss. The words struggling for utterance choked her: she could not answer.

"Ah!" continued Assheton scornfully. "I understand it all now—you played your part well, Miss Stanier. I'm glad that for two minutes at least you forgot it—that you were able to be your true self. The only thing that distresses me is that you have given yourself so much trouble about it all."

"It was no trouble, I wanted to do it—no one made me do it—do you hear?—no one," she cried petulantly.

"I daresay not. But from your own lips I gather that your visit to Challinor's house, the pleasure of your company this evening, has been a little arrangement to achieve Robert Lester's object, even at the expense of your own feelings. What a valuable ally you are."

The girl had never seen Assheton thoroughly roused before, and in the scathing contempt of his words she knew that she was being scourged with her

own rod. A fierce anger rose in self-protection within her against this man, who dared to defy her as she had defied him. No adequate outlet for her anger however was within reach. It seemed as if he held every post of vantage.

"If you want to insult me," she burst out, but she could get no further, tears blinded her eyes, her knees shook under her. Where was her independence now, when her heart craved for comfort, for someone or something to put her at peace with herself, her tangled emotions into order? She knew that her action had been deceptive, unworthy, and yet a sense of injustice qualified her shame. Surely so great a cause should condone subterfuges; subterfuges which had cost her so much. Any one less straightlaced, less narrow-minded than Assheton would have grasped the position, and even if he condemned her, would not despise her.

And he did despise her—she read it in his eyes, in the curve of his tightened lips, more than in his words.

"I don't insult you," he said stiffly, "far be it from me to judge you or anyone else in a matter of this kind."

"Oh, but you do, you do!" she cried.

"So you insist, but it seems to me that your judgment is out of your own mouth."

"Simply because you won't let me explain—because you think me a devil for nothing—because—" He stopped her with a quick movement of contradiction.

"What explanation can make things clearer? Everything is so obvious."

"Obvious—how obvious? You've only learnt half my story."

"And if I learnt the other half it would only make the case worse. We can't stand disputing in the street—it's freezing—I shall cross the road

to my house—but anyway—" he added quickly as if to put a definite end to the argument, "I'll see you home first."

"No," said the girl, raising her arm as if she would push him from her—"no, don't come another step, I'm going alone."

He half turned, but she still stood there, struggling desperately with her tears, determined that he should think her completely self-controlled before they parted.

"Is there anything more you wish to say?" he asked.

"Yes indeed," she cried haughtily, as if they were discussing a triviality; "what am I to answer Mr Lester? Kindly give me a proper message."

"If that," said Philip, "was all you wanted, I've no need to trouble you. I can take him my own answer."

He passed on. Behind his brisk footsteps the powdery snow swept into the air by the eddying blast, rose up between them like a soft white veil.

CHAPTER VI

AN ENCOUNTER

PHILIP ASSHETON opened his hall-door and closed it again softly. He paused for a second outside the parlour, and saw by the clock on the landing that it was only a quarter past eight. From the faint smell of cooking and the sound of the clicking of knitting needles that reached him, he knew that his sister was waiting supper for him, as she always waited. For the life of him, however, he could not in his present agitated state of mind face her across the table, or listen to her gentle voice and questionings.

He stepped cautiously up the stairs to his bedroom. It was cold and fireless. Shivering, he struck a match to watch it flicker among the twigs and coals and die down again. When at last the fire was fairly alight and the darkness dispelled by the shooting flames, he went to the window and threw it open, as if the spreading warmth overcame him. The snow lay on the ledge, but he brushed it off with his arms as he leant out into the night.

Though his pulses still throbbed from his recent anger, he blamed himself bitterly. Throughout the year he had known Agnes Stanier, he had schooled himself to believe that the essence of all his desires for her had been only the growth of her soul, the moulding of her character. He had accepted extreme youth as the excuse for her idiosyncrasies; in his simple faith he believed that in time they would be out-grown, and that she would rise like

the phœnix from the ashes of her present disposition and opinions.

To-night, the disappointment, the rush of misery which had come to him when she revealed her purpose in the street, showed him all too clearly amidst the tangle of his emotions, the link of the flesh with the spirit. He loved her desperately as she was—he felt jealous of her, body and soul. He still seemed to see her face under the lamp, in its glowing beauty and impulsiveness, sparkling with the play of feeling. He had watched it, rebelling fiercely that her latent power should be rung out and wasted by the influence of a bad man, an influence which sowed lies where all was made for truth, smothered candour with subterfuge, and contorted all the best into the worst, with reckless unreason.

He realised gratefully that as the scheming woman she had failed signally—the very truth that had found vent through her impulsiveness, had enfeebled her diplomacy and changed deceit into mere bungling.

The exceptional circumstances of his youth had, since boyhood, thrown Assheton for companionship among those who had turned sated from the sensualities of life, or those who from temperament had never approached them. Living actively, and consequently often in the centre of warring passions, he had looked at them rather as one without, than as one within, their charmed circle; not indeed with the indifference of the pedant, or with the horror of the puritan, but striving, half apprehensively, to understand their origin and power in the men and women around him.

That he should himself be drawn into an intense spiritual struggle in the comparative backwater of existence at Stoneyard, startled him by its unexpectedness. But the stress of soul that came upon

him did not for an instant quench the fire of his idealism; if he gloried in his awakened passion, he gloried also that he had still power to control it by his will. As he stood, wrestling with himself, his head buried in his hands, a new hope, a radiancy of re-kindled faith seemed to steal into him. He forgot that his idol was of clay, forgot that moment of disillusionment when it lay broken at his feet. All he longed for now, was to get his arms around the girl, and in the strength of his devotion, to save her from herself. There would be no satisfaction for the moment—he felt that—he felt indeed, how far the incidents of the evening had thrust them apart. When he met her again, he would be patient, and think of her, not exactingly—not as the immature girl she was, nor as the angel he lately imagined in the cold purity of his thought she should be—but as the woman she must become, wholly adorable, but marked with the scars and stripes of dearly bought experience. Strenuously he would strive and pray that Lester's harmful domination and counsels should pass, even if suffering were left in their track; that she should learn the man's worthlessness before it was too late, and look for healing for her stricken hopes, in his own unalterable love.

A great, almost superstitious persuasion, of such a future, filled him with consolation, and re-newed energy of purpose mastered him.

How long he stood there in the darkness of the night, thinking over the situation, he hardly knew. The cold drove him to the fire at last; he lit a candle, and sat on the high fender-guard, to find his mind now occupied with thoughts of Lester in his house over the way; Lester, the enemy, who must be made to understand that compromise was impossible, that his machinations would be opposed to the end.

For himself, Assheton would have been willing to

let things slide—for the people even, events must in the natural course work to an issue in one form or another, without his interference—but for the girl's sake, any weakness or temporising was out of the question. His manliness rode over his spirituality. This was no matter for evasion. He must fight aggressively with all the strength of his convictions.

It seemed inconceivable that a man of Lester's supposed daring and independence, could have sunk so low, as to use the girl's slavish admiration of himself and his cause, for the weaving of so petty a scheme. His foothold in the town must surely be very insecure—was he only the braggart he deemed him after all? If such were the case, Assheton felt that there was no time for delay; he must cast his contempt in the man's face, and prove to him that he would be more than his match.

He blew out the candle, went down, and crossed the street. Five minutes later, brushing past the woman who had opened the door, and in answer to his enquiries, had importuned for his name, he strode, with a peremptory knock, into Lester's study.

Once before he had been in this house, when an advertising ear-specialist had taken up his abode in Stoneyard for a few months practice of his quackery. He recollected his encounter with the man over an exorbitant fee he had charged a poor widow, and how he had bested him.

The room seemed altered now—cleaner, more interesting—but after all the chief change was the charlatan.

The gas in the wall brackets had been turned out, and at the large secretaire, overflowing with letters and papers, Lester wrote by the light of a green-shaded lamp; a whisky and soda stood at his right hand and a lighted cigar lay across the tumbler.

In the dimness, as he lifted his head, he looked pale and harassed. Assheton, holding his hat behind his back, waited a few steps from him, his eyes full of confidence and challenge. Then he broke out harshly :—

"Sorry to interrupt you, Mr Lester, but I want your attention for a few minutes."

If there was little ceremony in his entrance, there was a ceremonious rudeness in his address. Many men would have resented the intrusion, and immediately dashed into the battle royal evidently invited, but Lester intuitively divined the situation; he rose, with only a trace of surprise and embarrassment in his voice, and held out his hand.

"My dear fellow, what an apparition!—pray sit down; you find me in an awful mess, I'm only just back from London."

He looked so little like the typical social reformer in his light tweed travelling suit, as he walked forward and pushed up the arm-chair, that Assheton was taken aback. They had met previously on several occasions, but the circumstances and the surroundings were different. Assheton knew he had another man to deal with to-night.

"Thanks," he said stiffly. "I'd rather stand. I must apologise for coming at this hour. You gave a message for me to Miss Stanier."

Lester scanned him for a moment, then he threw himself back in his chair.

"I did: Miss Stanier was kind enough to say that she would convey my request,—by this time she has probably done so."

"May I ask why you should make Miss Stanier a medium for your messages?"

Lester shrugged his shoulders.

"That's how you choose to look at it. I can't see any vital reason for acting otherwise."

"Is there a vital reason why I should accede to

Miss Stanier's request more than to yours? Our views are in no way in accord—mine do not change for the mere asking."

Lester smiled.

"So I should guess," he said, taking the cigar from the glass; and drawing back his lips to put it between his teeth, he added with slow irrelevance, as if enjoying the aggravation of his accuser's indignation by his own restraint. "I wish you wouldn't stand there, you look so awfully uncomfortable; but if you won't accept a chair, at least allow me to offer you a cigarette." He held out the case.

"No thanks," Assheton answered curtly, "I don't smoke—let's keep to the point; if you think it is so easy to play ducks and drakes with convictions, why do you strive to impress Miss Stanier with the infallibility of yours?"

"Oh, I assure you I do nothing of the sort. I should be very much surprised if she has the ghost of an idea what mine are like. You earnest men set such store by convictions. Pardon me if I say there was no question of changing convictions or altering opinions in this case."

"How do you explain that? Miss Stanier asked me to speak at one of your meetings in support of the continuation of this strike, on some plea of our agreeing in the methods by which the economic questions affecting our labouring population are to be answered. You know perfectly well that I don't approve of this strike, or of any of your methods in connection with it."

Lester lifted the metal lid of the ink-bottle with a paper knife, letting it fall again with tiresome iteration.

"I was long ago aware what a tower of Babel we social reformers live in," he said ironically, "but I thought at least we had taught each other to cry

our parrot cries through the windows in one lingo, for the sake of our reputation with a sceptical public. You appear to think differently?"

"I have no parrot cries," retorted Assheton warmly.

"You don't allow then that you are a socialist?"

"I doubt if the title suits me, but the greatest interest of my life is the question of social reform, and I'm proud into the bargain that I approach it as a Christian."

"Come, now we're arriving at definitions—this promises to be absorbing. You remind me of the performing lion tamer Countess X., advertised, after the announcement of her accomplishments, as 'Countess by birth.' It's undoubtedly better to be a socialist, Christian born,—it gives the advantage; I congratulate you."

Philip struggled with his exasperation.

"I've not come to-night, Mr Lester, to be the butt of your witticisms," he said; "I came here to ask you by what right you make a tool of Miss Stanier, by what right you force her to work out your wild whims at the expense of all that she holds dear—and I mean to have an answer."

"Miss Stanier," Lester raised his eyebrows as if this new mention of her name had come as a surprise to him—"pray don't excite yourself on her account. I really don't know what she holds dear, but I certainly consider her a very good typewriter."

As he noticed this indifference, real or feigned, Philip felt a thrill of relief, felt too a contradictory impulse to seize the man by the throat.

"She's useful to fetch and carry for you, and to do your dirty work," he said indignantly.

Lester wheeled round in his chair.

"If you came here to-night because you're in love with that girl," he said, "why don't you say so? Why don't you tell me at once that you don't wish her to fetch and carry for me as you call it, and

that although your Christian convictions are unalterable, to say 'no' to her takes years of your life, that in fact—"

"Stop!" said Philip, half choking with anger, "stop, I tell you. It's bad enough that she's your slave, without making a mock of it."

Lester dropped instantly into his former nonchalance.

"For goodness' sake don't exaggerate; each man's his own master nowadays. As for mocking, that's the last thing I want to do. She takes things much too seriously to make a mock of. Upon my word, it would be better if she did fetch and carry for you. I expect I shall play the devil with her."

Assheton grew white to the lips.

"Oh, don't be a fool," said Lester impatiently, catching sight of his expression. "Not in the way you think; but I play the devil with everything, I simply can't help it."

It was impossible for Philip Assheton to deny that this man was unexpected—out of the common run. Baffled in his desire to create a simple quarrel in the girl's defence, he felt uncertain how to proceed. In spite of himself, he knew that anger was evaporating into interest—he grew aware of a certain magnetic attraction in Lester which alarmed him. He would have liked to cut the interview short under a presentiment that having come to curse he might be forced to stay and bless. A glimmering suspicion of such a frame of mind in his antagonist seemed to have touched Lester. He abandoned the cynical indifference of his attitude, and leant forward eagerly.

"Look here, Assheton—you and I are made to be enemies, foes yesterday, foes to-morrow. I'm quite prepared for it—it can't be helped. Will you compromise with yourself so far to-day as to argue with me without bias? No, not about Miss Stanier," as Philip made a movement of dissent, "but about

our socialism, yours and mine. It's not to be wondered at that you don't understand mine. At least let me try and penetrate yours, you're confusing at present."

As Lester spoke, Assheton recognised that it might be as well for the girl's sake to discover all the hidden depths of this eccentric man. It would sharpen his weapons for her defence. Therefore, without further comment he sat down and fell into his opponent's mood.

"It's very plain," he said, "that you don't choose to understand."

"How do you mean?"

"Your policy is one of wilful destruction, not of restoring, or purifying—in fact all that our good old world wants," asserted Philip.

"It's not possible to reconstruct or change at all without destroying," said Lester. "How are you going to get rid of the present false quantities out of your good old world as you call it—answer me that?"

"Certainly not by dragging every institution down about our ears, by playing wholesale havoc with classes and customs, simply because they happen to be established—that won't make unhappy men happy."

"Ah, are you sorcerer enough to make anything do that?"

"Is it not the case," Assheton went on, unheeding; "that you set more store upon changed circumstances, than on changed character?"

"Oh, you Idealists!" said Lester with a laugh. "Where shall we be if socialism is to rely on you? It will be like whistling for the wind, to get any measures carried through, any right action taken that will compel a change to be made. If many of your sort enlist in our ranks, I despair of the coming century." And crossing his legs, he leant his head back on his hand wearily.

Assheton was beginning to be absorbed in the discussion.

"I assure you I don't ignore the economic side a bit. But without religious faith where are we? The common needs of the people are appalling, I allow, but the spiritual needs are more appalling still."

Lester looked bored.

"My dear sir, there's been so much humbug connected with religion, so much preachy - preachy of the cant of content, so much shirking of truth, that I confess I'm a little in front of, or behind the times in following these views. Glory be to Christ, or Mahomet, or Buddha, say I, but I don't very much see how they're going to help to wake up our world."

"What sort of an awakening is it to be, when your pleasure is to fan every man to discontent, simply to give him as his noblest motto—'Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow I die.'"

"Well, to eat, drink, and be merry, is something at least in this cursed life," said Lester, bitterly: "education, discipline, religion, what do you want with them? To make men reason, to see for themselves that there is nothing worth having anywhere? —that all is rotten—rotten—rotten?"

"It's mere lunacy," said Assheton, "to flaunt your suicidal theories in the faces of our working population. *You* may be able to steer through them without shipwreck, but you're dragging these men from one state to another that is certainly worse than the first."

Lester drank off his whisky and soda.

"Oh, it takes them out of themselves," he said, putting down his glass. "It throws a little excitement into the monotony of their existence. Wouldn't you rather be killed in a street riot, fighting for so-called freedom, than starve resignedly in a back slum with a parson mumbling prayers over you? I would."

"People are starving in back slums here," said Assheton, gravely.

With a little grimace, Lester ran his forefinger along his moustache.

"That's because they won't take the chances offered to them. They haven't the pluck of mice."

Assheton grew angry again. Lester was taking up a position that put him outside the pale of all reasonable argument.

"How can you dare," he exclaimed wrathfully, "to turn these great matters into a mere game played for your own diversion? Where is your morality? You talk of upsetting the existing order simply because it exists. Do you understand what this means in our country? Men without education or respect for God or government, suddenly surcharged with a force that may dash the hardly-won victories of the ages into the dust. The inanity of the aristocracy—the vulgarity of the plutocracy—can never effect one hundredth part of the harm in England that the militant materialism of an ignorant democracy could. Your branch of the socialist party knows this well enough, and you, as its representative, revile every other political party and betray your own! It's almost fiendish, the wretchedness you're causing in this place, the evil you're pouring into one pure soul! Are you wreaking some inhuman revenge, that you run amuck in Stoneyard, making this petty strike the medium for preaching a gospel of hatred and destruction?"

"The gospel of hatred, my eloquent friend," said Lester grimly, "you're right, that's about all I know. What do we want with a gospel of love? Don't be afraid, though," he went on quickly. "These are only my inmost fancies, run out for your especial benefit and improvement! Be assured that my public expressions of my party's policy are thoroughly conformable to rule."

Assheton fixed his eyes on his opponent's face;

he spoke more quietly after his passionate exhortation.

"Then is it impossible for you to be honest with yourself and face the situation?" he asked. There are many around you clamouring for the truth; why do you evade it? You flatter and cajole your followers, till in their puerile conceit they think they have the wisdom of the giants; their so-called enlarged ideas are resolved into an exaggerated form of self-worship!"

"Why should they worship anything?" interrupted Lester fiercely.

"Because it's the natural order of things. The flower worships the sun; the child its mother; humanity God; the man the woman—" he hesitated as the face of Agnes Stanier rose before him.

"You're a master of rhetoric, but you've not proved to me to what end this exertion of emotion?"

"To what end?" Assheton asked.

"Yes, to see your flower rooted up by the storm, to see your child grow up to find its mother clay, to see your man who finds the saint among women and all his happiness—" Lester ceased abruptly, leaving his sentence unfinished. "You'll think I'm mad," he added passionately, "to rail against the inexorable fate which you call God—life makes people mad, when it gives everything but that which makes it worth living."

A great uncertainty awoke in Assheton's mind at the incongruity of this man's aspect and of his occupation and talk. He looked at the white, well-tended hands, at the figure of distinction in the well-cut clothes, at the comforts in the room. This man a revolutionist, and of the most unreasoning type! The thing was a mystery. Quick as lightning there crept into his wondering mind the conviction that Lester lay tortured under some unexpressed sorrow,—full of faith in his own luck,

he had fixed his plan of life as he had wished it before him, and had seen it wrenched in pieces by the force of circumstance. Now, in agonised rebellion, he was struggling like some hunted creature that lies bound limb by limb with only its fangs left to tear—to maul—to kill.

In Assheton this thought grew, and with its obsession came forgetfulness of his own anger, and of this visit's intention, in a rush of overwhelming sympathy for him who had said so truly that he was his foe yesterday and would be his foe to-morrow. He stood himself with his feet upon a rock, upright in every fibre of his strenuous character —by nature a rescuer. He would have given much at the moment to have betrayed his discovery, to have laid down his arms and offered peace from a full heart, if it could have brought his adversary relief. But the tension of the situation demanded silence only. To show that he perceived the nakedness of that soul, Assheton knew would be an irreparably false step. Lester, standing now beside him, still quivering with emotion, saw in his eyes the anger die down, saw them grow wide and comprehending, and shrinking from the dawn of intimacy, he strove to turn the current of his opponent's imaginings. Adopting a jocular tone of voice, he spoke again quickly.

"What rot I talk—no wonder I surprise you. We social Democrats get the *idée fixe* to such an extent that we pretend that every other man's misfortune is our own. Goodness knows I've nothing to grumble about; with the desire and the wherewithal to make myself thoroughly disagreeable to my own good-for-nothing class, I'm in clover."

As he spoke he watched for a change in Philip's expression, and then burst out laughing at the sheer idiocy of diverting his speculations by so futile an explanation.

But Assheton kept silence, seeing how much indulgence was needed, how useless, by resuming the subject of their altercation, would be the resurrection of Lester's anger and raillery.

Presently he rose to leave. "Don't you think this room's awfully hot?" he suggested vaguely, feeling that a commonplace remark would serve the occasion best.

"Infernally hot," Lester answered, half believing in the success of his red herring, "but our discussion would have made any room warm—don't go," he added eagerly, "I'll open the window; have something to drink."

"Much obliged—I must be off; it's late and we shan't bring our arguments to any satisfactory conclusion. I can only repeat I'm sorry that to speak for you, or to support your tactics in any measure, is an impossibility. Another time it would be best to deliver your messages yourself."

The interview was ended. Assheton was forcibly reminded of how little progress he had made in his efforts to keep Agnes and Lester apart. The girl would come again and again to her occupation, probably unsuspecting the dual nature of this man, and, in spite of his continual contradictions, he would build up his theories in her mind to a plausible and disastrous whole. Notwithstanding the pain of this fancy, he made his leave-taking civil, but Lester's right hand shook, as in his anxiety to avoid any proffered friendliness, he held the empty glass.

"I doubt if there'll be another time," he said huskily, "but remember, like better men before me, I was ever a fighter. If you want to know the truth, your influence is much stronger than mine in the town, a d——d sight too strong. They'll all accept the compromise you're working to bring about, if it's once seriously offered them. Water in their

whisky is what these weak heads prefer; they kick at my asking them to take it neat."

"It's fortunate they still know what's good for themselves," said Assheton, as he went out.

Lester stood for a minute looking at the door. Then he dawdled back to the writing table and stuffed his letters into the little drawers. "I miscalculated," he soliloquised, "the girl was right when she doubted her success. Women's tricks are not for men of his calibre. The fellow's a study though, —he knows no more of life in its hopeless disproportion than a month-old baby; yet he lays down laws and rules for himself and everybody else as if he'd made a detailed survey of every inch of it. The extraordinary thing is that probably his problems will work out to a perfectly correct result. He will live a life of success and beat the record at three score and ten. What a monster fate is—what a monster!"

Then with the lines deepening round his mouth and across his forehead, Lester put the evening paper under his arm, turned out the reading-lamp, and went up to bed.

CHAPTER VII

THE STRESS OF CIRCUMSTANCE

THE weeks dragged on. In spite of Lester's prophecy the strikers still held out, clinging obstinately to their demands.

After his interview with Assheton, Lester seemed to throw even greater venom into his efforts to keep masters and men apart.

It maddened him to remember that Philip should have taken him off his guard, should have lifted his iron mask for one second, as unintentionally he had allowed him to do. He dashed frantically into the fray, knowing well the only result for the dyers, but staking his reputation, as a man of unflinching purpose and indomitable will, against their sufferings, and apparently impervious to the anathemas hurled at him by the local magnates and the moderate press.

But Assheton could not be deceived. His momentary impression of Lester remained uneffaced. He was to him no longer the paid reckless agitator, but a new being, infinitely more interesting, and for the girl infinitely more mischievous. Lester's mysteriousness had, into the bargain, awakened a curiosity unlikely to be allayed, but it qualified all Assheton's condemnation, and for a time weakened his resolution in the struggle. He had stayed his hand a little, disheartened by the triumph of evil over good, marvelling at the lack of reasoning power in the men who took madness for wisdom in their leaders, and sought

no interpretation of the present impasse, save what was offered them in stereotyped bathos and flattery, from the platforms of meeting halls, or across the bars of public houses.

For in Stoneyard itself the immoral influence of the strike was being keenly felt. Idleness had brought its attendant ills. Women who had never begged, hung, like habitual street mendicants, round the doors of the benevolent, clamouring for help; soup tickets and blankets were doled out and greedily accepted by those who fought against the givers.

Men, honest by training, and kept honest by work, scoured the country with collecting books, and falling a prey to drink and other enjoyments by the way, falsified their accounts at the headquarters of their lodge. An epidemic broke out, and little children died. The pawn-brokers' shelves overflowed, petty burglary and shop-lifting became common. The town was convulsed.

The masters, suffering least, looked on, holding back their proposals, unwilling to compromise. They knew that the outcome was practically in their hands, and were embittered even in their most yielding moments by Lester's arrogance. He stalked here and there, speaking at the street corners or at the cottage fireside, stilling the murmurs of the Union leaders by the sheer magnetism of his personal influence, and dropping promises without reflection, to keep up the hearts of his followers, as the money came in, in ever smaller amounts.

It may, however, be easily imagined that such a state of things in a provincial town of no great magnitude, brought about serious disorganization in social affairs. The inhabitants sifted into factions, and a general feeling of uneasiness characterized the greetings in the market place. A man looked twice at his own familiar friend before daring to presume

on the cameraderie of the past ; and within the doors of the beer-houses that, during the slackness of trade, flourished and grew fat, the wrangles and active disputes on the question at stake, were responsible for much damage of feature and furniture.

Meanwhile the country at large appeared all unconcerned. In a London radical daily, a feeble attempt had been made to start subscriptions, but the list soon dwindled and was dropped. Concise paragraphs in the corner of the inner sheet still announced that the strike of the dyers continued in Stoneyard, and that distress prevailed ; but people, their noses buried in the leading articles on the startling rumour of universal peace, or the latest society scandal, never read them ; and no one cared in the great world beyond, that while the women and children starved and wept, the trade began to slip away across the sea.

One Sunday afternoon in particular, an unusual torpor had settled over the place.

Away in a back alley, a little group of salvationists sang in the spring sunshine, and when the hymns broke out to some popular strain, forced the loafers around irresistibly to join them. Among the leaders of the band stood Nicholas Clulow. Stirred by the light breeze, the thin grey hairs on the top of his uncovered head lifted and fell with quaint effect. His frock coat, shiny at the seams, was tightly buttoned to his frayed shirt collar, and the stitches in the breast pocket were yielding to the pressure of a Bible full of notes, which somewhat ostentatiously had been pressed into space intended for a small pocket handkerchief.

For the time he was happy. In moments like these his simple conceit crept forth. He believed himself carried on hosannas, a spotless being, to the gates of heaven. In this converse with the Creator he forgot the peccadilloes of his past—the whisky

in his tea — the little prevarications, and evasions, which had made a business life for him impossible. School hours were his penance; his ill-regulated intellectual powers shrank from the discipline needed for the systematic education of others. John Stanier, he considered, had somewhat unwarrantably drawn him under his protection, but the material goods of life thus saved to him should, in the teaching of John Stanier's scholars, be gratefully acknowledged. For the rest, his genius and his salvation, of which he believed himself the proud possessor, were his own—no man had power over his soul.

To-day he sang the more lustily, for his heart was full of Agnes, the school-master's daughter. So absorbed was he in his own feelings that he had not even suspected a rival in Philip Assheton. In fact he was convinced that the girl was his predestined lover—his future wife. She treated him ever with the condescending kindness that a woman exhibits to a weakly child; but this he did not notice, rejoicing when her smile glorified the verses, poured forth in her honour, and grieving at her utter indifference to what appeared to him as the essentials of existence. "Oh, God! bring the wanderer into the fold," he prayed yearningly, as the sun sank lower in the heavens, and the group around him shouted fervently "Amen, Amen!"

Meanwhile, down the High Street in their little cottage, Philip Assheton and his sister sat at ease. Stanier and his daughter had been with them for the mid-day meal, but they had both left immediately it was over: he, pleading work, which even the seventh day failed to loose him from; she, making no excuses. At three o'clock the brother and sister were alone. It seemed as if the silence between them was the usual hall-mark of that best

intimacy between hearts that understand, but the leaves of the Parish Magazine between Laurina's fingers rustled ceaselessly, and Philip, lounging on the settee amidst a number of books heaped around him, was restless—looking up constantly as if a noise disturbed him, when truly the only sounds worthy to be named were the dawdling footsteps of a love-making couple along the pavement, or an occasional church bell.

Suddenly Laurina dropped the paper across the snowdrops that filled the blue Delft bowl on the table. She sat down beside her brother.

"Philip," she said, pulling him by the sleeve.

"Yes."

"I want to talk to you. When are we going away from here? It's a dull and uncongenial life for you, and I don't think you're achieving your purpose."

"Dull?" said Philip; "dull—with a tragedy buried or being born in every life I come across? It's absorbing, this experience—there's no dulness in it."

"You didn't come here," she persisted with quick reproof, "to have your whole career checked and unsettled by the waywardness of strangers."

"Do you think me unsettled?" he said.

"Yes, I miss your old optimistic self. In spite of your real faith, you're growing morbid. At times your criticisms are scathing—it worries me."

Philip took her hand in his, kindly,

"You mustn't be worried," he said, "I've a purpose to achieve by staying here."

"You long ago discovered the futility of your purpose with John Stanier. What else is there to keep you?"

He did not answer.

For a week or two he had avoided all confidential talks with his sister. Passing, as he was, through a phase of depression and uncertainty, her searching

questions only vexed him and drove him to mendacious replies. Ever in his mind from morning till evening travelled thoughts about the girl he loved, the girl he must in some way or other save from ruin.

Up till now his efforts at reconciliation with Agnes Stanier had failed in every direction. He had forgiven her a hundred times over for the wrong she had done him, but she had not forgiven him his victory. In every familiar circumstance of life she met him with defiance, and he would go from her presence wretched and unnerved by her short and stinging answers, or long contemptuous silences. Helpless as he was to change the situation, the strain to him was intolerable, and he felt it was more than he could bear. He knew that he must, as his sister this moment urged, go away for good, and seek a complete separation from the girl, and that only relief possible in distress—active work in the full current of life.

At this moment the mention of John Stanier's name presented a fresh hope to his imagination. Why had he not endeavoured to induce the father to save his daughter? He alone could do it, if his sleeping passion was sufficiently roused; if he could be drawn from his fatal inaction, to respond to an appeal to his honour and his love.

His sister, at his continued silence, repeated her remark rather sharply.

"It's quite true, dear, isn't it, you've had no real influence with the schoolmaster?"

Philip smiled.

"The dear old stoic," he said at last. "No, I've not done much with him, but I think he's great as he is."

"It's all very well, Phil, this abstract study of the character, or religion of the men you come across. It may be interesting, but I don't want it to absorb you.

You have your career before you—you mustn't let these people turn you to right or to left of it."

"What's a career?" answered Philip, taking up the words musingly. "My idea of a career is to search out all that has a real meaning to oneself from birth to death, no matter the divergent currents that may in a worldly sense stop advancement. The career of most successful men is divorced from all they most care for—a stupendous mockery. You mustn't be ambitious even for me, Laurie."

"How can I help being ambitious for you? I want you to walk above the common herd, secure in your faith and success. Not one of those with whom you associate is worthy to sit in the same room with you."

Philip looked into his sister's adoring eyes. "Who said 'love is blind'"? he asked with a laugh. "Faith and success are not synonymous terms, but I'm a disappointing churl, am I not? I know your dream —to see me in the whitest of surplices, in the highest of pulpits, in the biggest of churches, gesticulating over the largest of crowds. I've a lot to ask your forgiveness for."

"Don't talk like that! You're my darling always. Only," she added regretfully, "the simple discipline of our Church would have been so reposeful."

"Reposeful!" he cried. "I hardly think my energy will consent to lie down just yet. Let me fight the battles, first, Laurie."

"Yes, yes—you've chosen what you felt to be right, only I fear sometimes lest the very complexity of life should unbrace you."

Her hand trembled, as she plucked from his shoulder a little fluff of down.

Philip stood up suddenly, and looked down at his sister.

"I'm not unbraced," he said uneasily. "If I puzzle you, remember I'm only human. I may

have my moods sometimes, and I always had an impossible temper."

"Ah! if it were only a mood; but you're changing," she said. "There's something in the background, a human influence holding you in check, I believe some one you care for and never speak of. You were keen—keen for months to carry through a settlement of the strike, and yet lately you appear to falter even about that. I, who watch you every moment, can't make mistakes. Philip, don't hide anything from me."

He laughed with some embarrassment. "You're so accustomed to see me with the gloves on," he said evasively, "ready to have a round with anyone who dares to groan over the wickedness of mankind, that I suppose a more placid, perhaps I ought to say a duller frame of mind, alarms you, isn't that it?"

"It's more than that; I don't notice the peacefulness. You're less determined in following the one purpose, less certain of yourself."

Philip shrugged his shoulders.

"Less self-satisfied, you mean? Doesn't Nicholas content you with that quality? I'd like to know who but an ass could remain self-satisfied long, when he begins to walk uphill. However, if it pleases you, dear, to know it, I've been a bit fussed lately."

"Have you—what about?"

"What about, my tormentor?—oh, about everything—the whole kettle of fish here."

Much against Philip's will the conversation was opening out; to her affectionate inquisitiveness Miss Assheton resigned her discretion.

"Do you see Agnes Stanier often?" she asked suddenly.

"No—yes, I suppose so," he hastily corrected, fidgeting with the china ornaments on the mantelpiece.

"What does she say to you?"

"I told you I saw her, and that's about all."

"But she must speak to you," persisted Laurina.

"When she condescends, it's sometimes 'good morning' and sometimes 'good night.'"

"She's a rude girl," and Laurina, flushing, had more severity in her manner than Philip had ever noticed before, when Agnes's name was mentioned.

"Ah, but you forget," he said as if in apology, "that day she came to tea some long time back, we had a misunderstanding. She's not been here since."

"No, she's never proposed a visit, and I've been so kind to her too. I could have loved that child, but her manners won't mend, she'll listen to no one."

Philip took up the defence.

"It's not her fault a bit," he demurred. "I understand her completely."

"What nonsense, Phil; her foolish self-will is at fault."

"For God's sake, Laurie, don't be hard on her; really and truly, it's not her fault."

The sister did not reply. The little lace lappet on her neat hair fluttered as she tossed her head. She took up the magazine again.

"I know you condemn out of your love for me," Philip continued. "But it's silly of you not to see that Robert Lester is working all this. I want to hate the man, but I can't quite. It's odd, isn't it?"

"You don't dislike him?" exclaimed Miss Assheton, dropping the paper in amazement.

"Dislike him! Yes, heartily, but I pity him so. He's completely under the ban of some gnawing sorrow—he appears to have no faith, no hopes, and he dashes into every body else's faith and hopes like a bull in a china shop."

"You've been seeing him and talking to him then?"

"Yes. I went to his house burning with indignation, ready to forget my best self, ready, I might say, to spring at his throat. I came away, not with my indignation less, for it must be felt on every count, but mystified, undecided. I expected one person and found another. I've recognised his power and am terrified at its effect on Miss Stanier. Yet in spite of myself, I have at once a longing to annihilate, and to save the man."

As he made this confession, Philip let his head fall into his hands, and Laurina, forgetting at his dejection all but her great tenderness, went and stood by his side; her fingers stroked his hair. Each trouble—each anxiety that touched him, rang its answer in her devoted soul.

"It's not your work to save him, Phil. You see too far—so much too far. Your heart's too big. I say again, let's go away from here. In every way it would be better."

Her brother threw up his head at her words; a light sparkled in his eyes.

"No, a thousand times no—we can't go!" he said: "It's perfectly true, I've been weak lately, but my real purpose isn't changed in spite of this phase of indecision—not a bit. Whatever happens, I'll see this strike through, and I'll save those whom I can save—those I can't are in better hands."

"But what can you do, dear, what can you do?"

"I swear I'll bring this business to an outcome tomorrow or the next day; I'll make a fresh effort to get the masters to the decision we've been wanting so long. The men shan't be driven to a beating all round, but Lester we'll hunt off the field, I wonder to what fresh enterprise—I wonder—" he paused. "If only his mischief-making here can be wiped out, that's the thing—that's the only thing that matters."

Assheton spoke exultingly. The elixir of a new

resolution made the blood race through his veins. Then Miss Assheton made an observation :—

"Do you think Agnes Stanier will go away with this agitator? Have things gone so far as that?"

It was a startling remark. Philip stared at his sister, his brows knitted.

"What do you mean? What makes you think of such a thing?" he said sharply.

"Well, she will never be happy here when he goes, and if he finds the girl useful to his plans and schemes, why shouldn't he marry her? Her father seems sadly indifferent to the child's future."

"Stanier isn't indifferent, he's only waiting, as we're all waiting. What can be done now? Restraint would only make things worse."

"Well, of course it's your way of looking at it. My impression is that if she's not taken to task soon it will be too late. At present she's lost, heart and head, in this wild propaganda. After all he may care for her. We must give the man his due. And from what I'm told he appears to have means."

"He doesn't care for her—not that—not that"—Philip snapped his fingers.

"How can you tell, dear boy?"

Almost fiercely he turned on his sister.

"Because I know what love is. Because I judge him by my own standard—I worship her."

So in this roundabout manner Laurina learnt at last what she had striven to know, and what she had so dreaded. In an instant her eyes filled and over-flowed with tears. With trembling lips she entreated.

"You mustn't love her, Phil. She's not for you; she will ruin your life, steal all your strength from you. Dear heart, promise me you won't cherish this dreadful notion, promise me you'll put it from you."

Yet though she repeated her entreaties, he gave no promise, but stroked her cheek lightly and tenderly in the expectant silence, as if asking forgiveness; presently, when her tears increased he took up his book and went quietly out of the room.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SHADOW OF THE FUTURE

WHILE Miss Assheton cried over her dismal discovery in the little parlour, Agnes sat, with her legs dangling a few inches from the ground, on a low wall that surrounded the old Friends' Meeting House; a building which, through the strange evolution of terms and teaching, had been in this year converted into the Stoneyard Labour Church.

The sun sinking in the west gilded all the sky; small purple clouds sailed slowly above the tall elm trees in the churchyard, and amongst their great leafless branches, the starlings chattered.

In the girl's eyes and in her hair the gold lay reflected, and at heart she was supremely content. Lester leant beside her idly, and for the nonce, peacefully reflective; the smoke from his cigar curled around her joyous face.

"That was a firebrand of a speaker this afternoon," he said, tilting his hat over his brow, "he disturbed even my post-prandial slumbers. I really must ask our good secretary, if he expects me to attend these services, to draw the line at outcast parsons and fustian-jacketed poachers, they're much too exhilarating."

"Did you think so?" answered Agnes. "I liked it. The other churches are emptying now. Look—nothing but old women and children!"

She held out her hand and pointed to where simultaneously from right and from left, a broken

thin stream of people came, sauntering; the children amongst them, full of play, knocking off one another's hats, shying stones, running, in an outburst of relief from the hour's restraint. From the far distance in faint snatches came still the sound of the Salvationist band.

Lester's eyes followed the direction of her hand.

"One faith and one God," he said, and the corners of his mouth curled.

Agnes looked at him with curiosity.

"You're glad we've won over most of the working men to our religion?" she persisted, "aren't you?"

"Glad," he said, meeting her earnest gaze. "Well, if you want me to say I'm glad, I'll say it, but does it much matter,—this aesthetic religion of humanity? Twenty years ago shovel-hatted Quakers preached and slept in this place; twenty years hence will it still be our happy hunting ground? That's the question."

Agnes pouted.

"You throw cold water on everything."

"Only on dreams and dreamers: they depress me."

"If you're going to be depressed about things, to-day of all days——" she began.

"Why to-day of all days?"

"Because it's a day to be happy—it's really the coming of spring. Look how long the daylight lasts, and all those trees by the river are getting yellow and feathery. I love the feel of it—it makes me so alive, it makes me so hopeful."

With a little daring gesture she flung out her arms as if she would hug the grey-green landscape.

Lester was silent. Something in the remark seemed to stifle his speech. He dug his heel among the crocuses in the soft brown earth.

"Can't you imagine why I love the spring?" she

repeated impatiently, in her desire to wring some sympathetic reply from him.

"What's the use?" he said, "I'm racing through my autumn to the winter of discontent. My only notion of spring at this moment is that I shall probably be in America when it comes round next year."

The girl winced. "America? Will that be interesting?"

"Hardly interesting, but more satisfactory; there's no hesitation there—the Yankee is always cocksure."

"Do you know," she said, "I believe you've inherited the ban of the wandering Jew. Wander, wander, always wandering; but never contented, not even with the great things you do. I don't know how old you are, but you must have had an exciting time with one thing and another. Why did you become a socialist?"

"Cussedness," said Lester, throwing away the end of his cigar.

"That's not the real truth," she complained. "You're very difficult to understand. One moment I think of you as a sort of Napoleon, ready to lead an army over the most impossible mountains, to compel the whole world to obey you—the next moment—well, the next moment, I really don't know what to think."

"My dear young friend, defend us from consistency; life is much pleasanter as a peep-show. If you've to shudder over the bearded lady to-day, there's always a chance of being able to laugh at the funny man to-morrow."

The girl jerked back her head.

"I don't understand you," she said stiffly.

"Not for a moment did I think you would."

Then they were both silent. Lester began to whistle softly, a smile in his roving eyes. Along the lane, running beside the unevenly built red-brick

cottages which clustered below the tall factories, the young lovers dawdled, turning homewards for tea; a scorcher, dusty and haggard from his long ride, came with his bicycle into the cobbled street off the country road, and tramped slowly up the hill. The curate from the big church, recognizing the couple at a distance, hurried past, gazing in the opposite direction. Agnes, as she saw him, broke through the embarrassing pause with a laugh.

"That's Mr Jones—he's shocked at us—do watch him scuttling into the vicarage—what fun!"

Lester raised his head.

"Now there really is a matter to be serious over," he said banteringly, "and you laugh. What contradiction!"

"Oh!" with a little patronising air, "I make nonsense of trifles, and you of important matters; that's not right, and I'd scold you if I knew you better—I want dreadfully to know you better."

"Surely," said Lester, "a profitless desire, for there's nothing better to know."

Although many weeks had passed, carrying winter into this lamb-like close of March, Agnes shared Lester's confidences little more than in November. They had tacitly accepted Assheton's refusal of help. She had begun some lame apology on the subject, but Lester stopped her, reproaching her with nothing; saying that the failure of his desire was only what could be expected, and that it was not a thing of moment; in spite of her curiosity to know how much had passed between the two men, from that time the subject was avoided. Occasionally sweeping up to the high-water-mark of intimacy, Lester had retreated unaccountably again into distant acquaintanceship, keeping in his most virulent outbreaks, or playful cynicisms, a check upon himself, and indulging in no personal confessions. "Miss Stanier

this—" "Miss Stanier that—" with always perfect friendliness and civility, but her occupation as typewriter noticeably in the way. The very uncertainty of the position enthralled the girl. She was too young to analyse experience by experience. She felt that he had need of her in his work, and that the strange reticence Lester adopted would be broken soon, in the unfolding of some story of glorious sacrifice, of some tale of heroism which his modesty hid from her knowledge, and which would account for the career he had chosen, of self-devotion to a great movement.

In the meantime with their deceptive iteration, the cries he taught her about the cause were ever on her lips, while her heart, quite unconsciously, yet none the less absolutely, twined its love round the man. She copied his speeches and his pamphlets, she listened to his plans and his opinions which he poured out aloud to himself, half forgetting that she was in the room. For days he left the place, and returning would enlist her services by a verbal message, possibly through the telegraph boy or the milkman. One evening she would walk home clenching her hands to keep back the tears of vexation after an exceptionally formal interview in his study; the next day, because of a pleasant smile or a passing familiarity of speech, with pulses beating, and hope illumining all her castles in the air. And of all this she resented nothing, refusing to find fault.

As far as Lester was concerned, however, it would have been evident to the unprejudiced observer that through everything the girl remained to him the pretty child, the intelligent machine, the useful ally, according to his needs. He recognised, undoubtedly, the power of his opinions on her mind, but to search for her as a lover through the medium of her charm and personal attractions, seemed never to occur to him; the darkness falling on this March night could

not more surely veil from him the brilliancy of sunset than did his indifference the true knowledge of her secret devotion and desires.

"I think," he continued, letting their conversation slip to safer generalities, "that my useless campaign is pretty nearly at an end. We must have one good stirring row, to show that we can die game; eh?"

"Do you mean to say that nothing's going to come of all this; that all you have taught them will be forgotten, smoothed over—that as it was in the beginning so shall it be again and again—is that what you mean?"

"It's exactly what I do mean. Assheton, the hero, may perhaps bring about a compromise, but it's not my policy to have anything to do with half measures. You'll hear enough of my villainy and roguery long before your beloved spring returns."

Agnes gave a little cry—she had an inclination for tears.

"Why did you ever come here? You can't allow them to worst you. I don't think I can bear the disappointment now!"

"Ah," said Lester, "why did I ever come here? that certainly is a question."

"A perfectly fair one—you were meant to come. Things have happened so oddly for me. I think if you hadn't turned up I should have died of boredom."

Lester looked amused.

"I'm very thankful," he said, "that even at the expense of revolutionising your native town, I've saved you from so terrible a fate."

"You're simply teaching the town plain truths," she corrected.

"It's learning them in an uncomfortable way."

"I'm much more hopeful of the result than you are."

"Possibly. At eighteen one sees things as one wants to see them.

"And why shouldn't I be hopeful? — how much we long to bring new life to everybody. Haven't you said so over and over again. I hate all the ugly, pale, sad people I meet every day now."

"You'll go on meeting them for a bit longer," said Lester with a shrug. "Men and women are born wrong, and the Almighty has no intention of mixing the pack again. It'll take us some time to do His work for Him."

All Lester's habitual restlessness seemed to have returned, as he paced up and down with long, slow strides in front of the wall, snapping the dry twigs savagely under his foot-steps.

"What do you mean by talking to me like this?" said Agnes, her eyes wide and swimming with her trouble. "You don't speak like this to the strikers at our meetings, or dictate these sentiments to me on paper. You give me books to read that insist on the success of our schemes. You're cruel to talk like this now."

"Perhaps I'm cruel because I realise every day more fully the helplessness of even the strongest spirits in the struggle to build anew. What result is there for them? A life of toil, an obscure death— nothing else whatever. Our socialist leaders may write about the sacrifice of the individual to the good of the aggregate, but I've no patience to wait on the 'slow course of the ages.' I'm not of the stuff of which martyrs are made. If I follow the policy of uprooting it's because I like to see at any rate the outcome of my labours. In a puny fashion one can play the Creator's game of destruction with some success.

A recollection of a remark Assheton had once attributed to Lester on this subject, returned

suddenly to Agnes; a little shiver thrilled her frame.

"It's incomprehensible to me," she said slowly, "why you like making yourself out a sort of fiend. You talk of destroying, but you shut your eyes to the fact that the place is absolutely different since you came."

Lester looked incredulous.

"How Quixotic! In what way is it different?"

"You have made the men take a pride in their union—in themselves. You've given them a great impetus in the fight. Oh, you've done heaps of things!"

"That's just it—heaps of things. Your imagination forms quite an *ignis fatuus* on the subject. Do you ever think of grubbing in the backyard of all these fine theories to find the rubbish. No—we don't grub in Stoneyard—we take things on trust."

"I don't."

"Present company ought to be excepted, Miss Stanier, but I declare you're taking me on trust with a vengeance. Soon a gayer knight will ride by, and bring you his fairy tales, which will eclipse mine."

"What fairy tales have you told me?" she cried indignantly.

"Not those that he will sing to you."

The western sky for an instant seemed to have transferred its dazzling redness to the girl's face.

"I don't like being teased, any more than I like being puzzled," she answered; "be practical and talk about the stirring row we're to have."

Lester stopped in his walk, his manner changed.

"Yes, we must have that, although it will mean nothing. The difficulty is to get a telling speaker from headquarters. They want something fresh; the dyers are getting sick of their local favourites,

I'm certain they are of my arguments—and no wonder—bread and dripping once a day isn't very stimulating to a Briton's pluck. Under the southern sun men in like straits feed upon themselves, with certainly more effectual results."

"Not cannibals?" she asked, startled.

"No, not cannibals, little goose, but men who really do touch what they want, be it only their own perdition. Our socialist reformers stand shrieking that 'they won't be happy till they get it' but they never move any further towards attainment, than obstructing the Piccadilly traffic."

"What do you wish them to do?" said Agnes interested.

"I'll tell you another day. Till we get the proper weapons forged, I suppose we'd better remain men of inaction, and shout of rights and wrongs from our armchairs."

"Let's at least work out something here between us," she cried; "I suppose you still think Philip Assheton would have been the best help we could have got?"

It was a venture, and she speculated on the reply; it came quite simply.

"Yes, probably; a pity we failed with Assheton. He's a strenuous individual, I allow, but a boor to have refused you so small a request. A rare animal in modern society certainly—a man who has shaped his convictions from principle, and not from experience. Whatever comes with years, as they say, he'll ever stick to those principles in their original form."

It was the first time for weeks that she had mentioned Philip's name. The girl was glad to be given occasion for an attack on her bugbear.

"I think his convictions ridiculous," she said contemptuously.

"Do you know, I don't. I'm interested in him.

If I were of the other sex I should be even more so. It would be a triumph of feminine accomplishment to send a man like that to the devil."

"I should think the devil wouldn't thank one for such a prig," she retorted.

"Do you really call him a prig? I wonder why. What do you define as a prig? I'm doubtful on the point."

"Any one can tell a prig by instinct," said Agnes sweepingly.

"That's what all women say, but when you come to pin them to details, it seems that when a man parts his hair down the middle and says 'I beg your pardon' instead of 'What?' he's instantaneously dubbed a prig. Now Assheton, I've noticed, is guilty of neither of these disgraces."

Agnes slid down from the wall. She assumed a defiant expression.

"If we're only going to talk this foolishness" she said, "I'd better go home."

Lester stooped to pick up her umbrella from the mud.

"I'd forgotten," he said, "that you'd a horror of the matter-of-fact—forgotten how terribly in earnest we ought to be. It must be confessed that the soothing atmosphere of this Sunday afternoon has made my conversation even more asinine than usual, my flippancy shall be as fleeting as" — he looked round the graveyard, searching for a simile—"as human life. What you wish me to be, I will be, my standard-bearer!"

"A poor sort of standard-bearer," she muttered, hovering between tears and laughter.

"Not at all. What, as I said before, am I to do without you?"

She began to draw patterns on the path with the umbrella.

"You can hardly understand," she said wistfully,

"what your cause means to me. I can't bear to hear you talk lightly of it even as a joke. I've always your earnestness among the people before my eyes; then I think of you as a true patriot. In fact," she added, half fearfully, "you make me feel absolutely heroic."

Lester's face shadowed.

"I'm neither a hero nor a patriot," he said shortly.

"You're not angry with me?" She cried apprehensively.

"Angry! Good God, why should I be angry? Only if you will live in a dream of Alnaschar, don't be surprised at a rough awakening."

"It's not a dream," she chimed in eagerly, leaning her elbow again on the wall so that the sleeve of her coat just touched his arm. "You have come to unlock realities to me. Honestly, you don't mean to laugh at them after all, do you?"

"The fates forbid," he answered.

At his lenity the girl's eagerness grew.

"It would be perfectly awful," she went on, "if you were the least bit of a hypocrite. I believe in you so. You know that all these weeks I've been working for you, I've grown happier and happier, I have thought only of putting one stone in this great work of yours. You say there's nothing but inaction—I long so for activity. If you would let me help you more fully—just in a measure—myself—" she broke off.

"You help me enormously," said Lester, biting at his moustache.

Agnes shook her head.

"Oh, no, I don't. It's only the type-writer you want. I'm but a part of the machine."

She turned her face to his, glowing in the grey light with excitement; involuntarily he laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"What a child you are," he said gently. "Think! Who else have I to sympathise with me here, to talk over the fortunes of war? No one but you."

Her heart beat quickly at the tenderness in his voice. Only once before had she noticed it, when he had been pleading for her good services with Philip Assheton, but this was a happier moment for her.

"You think I can be of use then? You don't think that because I'm a woman I shall always make a mess of everything? You'll forgive me for my failure with Philip? You'll want me to help you again soon?"

In her thirst to hear his answer, the questions tumbled one over another; but he spoke tardily, his manner growing cold and reserved as he noticed the abandonment of her words and attitude; his hand fell from her shoulder, he replied apparently with an effort.

"There's nothing to forgive, nothing whatever. You did your best. After all we've defied Assheton longer than I thought. He's too cautious in his schemes to get the popular feeling at once—but it'll come for certain. For the rest, if it all matters so much to you, I'm satisfied."

"Satisfied," she said. Then with audacity she cried. "Any trouble would be gloriously easy if it really made you satisfied."

He made a movement of impatience.

"Come now, what do you want to do?"

"Well, is there no mission, no message, nothing by which you could use my brains instead of my fingers?"

"I feel like one of your schoolmasters," he said, "implored by his pupils for a lesson in arithmetic. Do you want a new task immediately?"

Agnes caught at his words.

"Have you really got one ready for me?"

"As London claims me for a week, what do you

say to going down to Oldfield, and making my comrade Griffiths' acquaintance?"

She paused.

"Why are you always going to London? Do you do big things there? Have you got a lot of friends?"

"Am I to tell you about Griffiths?" said Lester, ignoring this cross-examination.

"Yes, please go on. What shall I say to him?"

"You must tell him you're a labour leader—that sounds well, doesn't it?—that you work for me, that I want a really stirring meeting soon, and one of his best speeches. It entails a railway journey you know."

"Oh, I don't mind that," she said, half disappointed, "it isn't much to do."

"Don't be impatient. As that school-master would say—make a success of the little things and the big ones will come racing after—who knows but what you may yet take your seat in a tumbril to Cleopatra's Needle, or some other up-to-date execution ground! Any way you'll find a kindred spirit in Griffiths. He's of the proper blood-and-fire social democratic kind; I'm afraid, though, he doesn't deal quite as much in abstract ideals as you do. Originally a working man, he gives up his whole time to the agitation, and, when he likes, is a first-rate talker. Perhaps I'd better let him know you're coming. Which day will suit you best?

"Oh, Wednesday perhaps—or Saturday—any day you like."

"I shouldn't choose Saturday."

But Agnes was not listening. Her mind had run back to his former remark.

"That's what I like about these socialists," she said, "Even if they're engaged in a profitable occupation, it's all given up to serve their fellowmen—it's splendid, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Lester indistinctly, lighting a fresh cigar behind his hand.

The girl stood close to him in the rapidly falling darkness, gazing away towards the town; it lay half hidden in the cold mist that had crept up from the valley. She thought she was truly advancing a step farther in his confidence. Would this new mission roll away the stone from his reserve, impress him with her trustworthiness, her intelligence? Every exertion for the cause was worth while, if in the future she could lead him to talk about himself, rather than his views.

"A penny," he said, smiling at her abstracted expression.

"Not worth it," she retorted; "I was engrossed by the thought of my father's supper. I really ought to get home. He has it at an unearthly hour on Sundays to get in a long evening's work. He wears himself to death."

"You don't mean to say you have to cook the supper?"

"No, only superintend it, whatever that is. You can't deny that I'm a model of filial duty."

"A model of all perfection. By the bye, what about meeting your father?"

"Well, may I be there to see the encounter, that's all," she replied evasively. "For the present I'm afraid I must go,"—she drew closer to him. "How much I have to thank you for—how much!"

Lester was fumbling with a match and his cigar—he did not take her outstretched hand.

"Don't thank me, please. I'll send you a note for Griffiths in the morning. Good-night again; good luck."

She left him reluctantly, and went down the hill and into the street with elastic swinging steps, turning once to wave a final adieu.

His cigar refused to light; for some minutes he stood sucking at it, then flung it into the gutter.

"One of life's little ironies!" he said, meditatively looking at the weed. But it was not of that he spoke. Of a sudden his vision seemed to have widened, for he added almost unconsciously, "If that pretty little girl grows sentimental, it won't help matters. Strike or no strike, I must hurry through my work here and go—I want no complications."

CHAPTER IX

ASSHETON PURSUES HIS PURPOSE

JOHN STANIER stood by his desk at the close of the morning's school.

In his hand he held a pile of copy-books, and as he glanced through one and the other, he slid them negligently on to the table, with a sigh.

"Times are changed," he said to himself, "and my boys too. There seems no spark of genius, no talent even, left amongst them. Ah—Assheton," —he glanced across the room. "Come here a moment. What do you think of this essay of Jayne's? It's got merit, eh?"

Assheton leapt over a form and came across to him. He took the copy-book from the schoolmaster, and his eyes searched affectionately the worn, handsome face.

"You're over anxious. These boys are unlikely to be incipient Bacons or Addisons, whatever you may wish."

"Well, look at this."

Philip read down the page and smiled.

"Very good imitations; the style ranges from Burke to Kipling, but in all crises we get Jayne; well done but flashy, I've not much confidence in that boy."

"When you grow pessimistic, Philip, I know there's little hope," and the schoolmaster gathering the books and papers into a heap, sat down and dipped his pen into the ink. But Assheton laid his hand across the blank foolscap; the sunshine

flooding all the room through the yellow blind, lighted his eager face.

"Not now," he entreated, "leave the work for a little—come out into the garden, I want to talk to you."

Stanier held his pen in mid-air hesitatingly. "Only one hour to lunch," he demurred, "and all Nicholas's mistakes to be corrected—Philip, what am I to do about Nicholas? He grows daily more hopeless."

"Ah, it's a serious consideration."

"All the more serious in that I can't treat him hardly—for the sake of the years that are past."

"Association is the tie that takes most to break, isn't it? When the association is as yours, I believe only death can break it, Nicholas will have to stop; I must do his share of work for the present as well as my own."

"His poetry on my daughter's curls and the salvation of his soul are all that matter to him."

"The saving of anyone's soul is important. But we employ curious methods of doing it," remarked Philip.

Stanier had yielded to persuasion and laid down his pen. He took his straw hat from the peg.

"Was that what you wanted to talk to me about?" he said smiling.

"No,—not immediately at any rate."

Notwithstanding, it was a golden opportunity, and Philip went out gladly with his chief, through the glass door in the passage into the prim back garden.

Over head the sky was brilliantly blue, and within the boundary walls the trees and shrubs were budding, the young grass beside the paths growing green and soft. In the dove-cot the pigeons cooed softly, and the sparrows on the roof twittered a hymn to the waking year.

With much the same pose of head and shoulders,

their hands clasped behind their backs, Assheton and Stanier, turning and returning, paced the narrow walk, absorbed in conversation.

"I repeat," said the elder man, "I take no interest in this strike—the dyers seem terribly misguided, but of course my judgment doesn't count for much as I haven't studied the matter. If Trade Unionism coerces its members to such action it must be a pernicious institution, and I fail to understand in what its advantage lies."

"Such a combination of labour," explained Philip, "is a necessity, to keep, in face of the great force of capital, an equitable social state. The safety of the individual depends upon the protection of the many."

"So you assert, but I hear you day by day deplore the strike here; you rail against the agitators, against the Trade Union officials; this is not convincing."

"I know you don't give any credit to a system of up-to-date education by which the man is taught even as the master, but one thing brings another, and if the workers are to benefit by Trade Unionism, they must understand it. They belong to the Union here now, but it's only a case of a flock of sheep; because Dick joins it, Tom thinks that he must also. In Stoneyard this present strike is grossly mismanaged. The leading officials of the Union have slipped into the hands of the one man—always a fatal course—and he thinks for the lot of them. Into the bargain Robert Lester is unscrupulous."

"So you think it a personal question?" said Stanier, "it's always seemed to me from what I've heard that strikes in general are mismanaged."

"Not at all. They have achieved great results, and loathsome as the system is, I can't deny that the dyers have a real grievance here to complain of."

"What's going to put an end to it?"

"I don't know I'm sure. They talk of this Trades Union Federation which will terrorise the employers, and compel justice from their hands for the mere asking. I'm rather sceptical of the beating beginning at that end of the stick, especially as the Capitalists think they must have a federation too. No, simply, we want a wiser education for the people—in fact more light."

"More light to jump over precipices," said the schoolmaster shaking his head. "There's too much of this levelling up, too much of this modernised teaching. A silken purse from a sow's ear; that was ever a failure, you know."

Philip laughed.

"You can't accustom yourself to the new age."

"No, Assheton, you're right, the past is all to me. I hate even to open a newspaper, and read of men attacking established customs and old laws. All the realities built up through centuries, all the benefits wrought by our forefathers, are ignored or forgotten. 'This is wrong,' they say, 'and that,' and without waiting for further enquiry, they erect superficial jerry-built constructions to block out all we once held sacred, and call it the dawning era—I won't have it at any price."

The schoolmaster spoke warmly. In him there stirred the sleeping life of controversial days, when with flashing eye his tongue had waxed eloquent at college debates, and the possibility of a parliamentary career loomed on the horizon. To have roused so much interest caused Assheton to carry on the discussion.

"In a sense you're right," he said, "there's too much blowing of soap-bubbles at the present day. But you mustn't tar us all with the same brush. It's impossible to ignore the fact, that what must be, will be. The past has been magnificent; it

holds the roots of the present and the future, but they in turn have their meaning. There's so much that's yet unfinished."

"If it were only a matter of finishing!" replied Stanier. "The questions of the hour don't improve but confuse the lessons of the past. The present generation have everything to learn and nothing to invent. Yet it is to jackanapes invention that all its attention seems turned."

"It may appear so to you, Mr Stanier, with your scholarly outlook, but we social workers yearn for a truer interpretation of a God, a better partnership between man and man, the widening of beliefs, the adaptation to our needs of the oldest laws."

"You'll never make men alike."

"That's what no one presumes to do, but in the very inequality there must be some plan, some unity, both for the shell of the social state, and for the heart. I see ever looming upon my horizon the bulwarks of the 'City of Friends.'"

There was a slight pause.

"The nobility of your aims, Assheton, is unquestionable," Stanier admitted at last, "but your methods are wrong, that's what I complain about. New fangled education, false deductions as regards economic questions, and that childish head-strongness which I see around me, that rattling of the foundations of the state to see it momentarily tremble; in fact the matching of progress against time, instead of using time to build up progress out of its own inimitable ingredients."

"There you're right—absolutely right. Evolution not revolution by all means."

"You agree with me on one point perhaps—but again we shall differ. In my young days men had minds which worked in unison more or less towards an object, or they were fools and didn't pretend

to minds. Now all ignorant boys and girls ventilate their own opinions, and criticise their neighbour's."

"But the individual, be he fool or knave, has a right to his own opinion—that's half the reason of our struggle—to convert each man from a nonentity to an identity."

"Then you preach collectivism as a theory, and insist upon the independence of the individual as a fact. My dear boy, you indulge in a work of art that I can't pretend to understand."

Assheton, always enthusiastic in serious argument, strove to explain further, but Stanier checked him.

"What about the inexorable destiny which makes a chain for every man's liberty if he attempts to assert it," he said sternly.

"I wish I could make you believe in a reasonable God, instead of in an irresistible destiny. You are so impersonal in your conclusions."

"No, no," answered Stanier quickly, "what has reason to do with these matters? Stick to your faith by all means, but once bring reason forward in your modern refashioning of beliefs, and you'll make sceptics of us all. But you've drawn me on to topics that I make a rule of avoiding. What I said in the beginning was that you would hardly have me believe that the Almighty takes an interest in this silk-dyer's strike?"

"Do you really think He doesn't?" said Philip simply. "The God of the living and the dead means much."

His thoughts returned swiftly to the girl. For her sake he had come out this morning, to draw Stanier into this controversy, to break up the fallow ground of his cut and dried opinions, and strive to reach the heart of the father. Thus at last to plead for her, to represent to him her danger,

and bring him back from his gloomy past which had weighed him down to inaction, to grapple with the crisis of to-day.

Week after week he had been hoping against hope, longing to see a change in affairs, either by the master's intervention, or by Lester's disagreement with his own followers. But there was little sign of compromise from either side. The winter had slipped away in shilly-shallying, back-biting, grumbling and sordid suffering, and the while Agnes had grown more impossible — her remarks more perverse — her reasoning more obscure. She had taken a leap in the dark after her leader, and appeared contented, neither, he was convinced, understanding Lester's doctrine, nor seeing what it must inevitably lead to. Assheton knew personal interference was worse than useless. To persuade John Stanier of the state of things, and frighten him from his apathy, was the only course left.

The monotonous deep voice broke in again upon his thoughts.

"I wonder that you can bear the burden of a classical course at all in your work here. The new science, with which I will have nothing to do, as well as this new religion, would be so much more in your line."

"For goodness sake, sir, don't misunderstand me. I've no wish to detract from the treasures of the ages. We can't exist without them, and if we have to do a bit of grafting and transplanting, at the end of the nineteenth century, it's not to be wondered at. Men are asking for bread, not for a stone."

"So you say, so you say, but it appears to me that there's too much coddling, too much effort for the eliminating of pain and sorrow. Pain and sorrow have to exist, and in trying to alleviate each man's lot, I'm not sure that you don't increase his burden. I remember before the strike the perfect content of

this town. In the morning the men and women passed, clean and tidy, to their work—in the evening they returned. I, looking at them over the study blind, have often wondered at their punctuality. In the rule of their life they were content, and now that you come to apply to them the rules of other peoples' lives, the result is nothing but discord."

Philip smiled.

"I'm afraid, Mr Stanier, you're rather fond of looking at the world from over your study blind." Then noticing the schoolmaster's troubled expression, he added hastily, "it's not that I want it otherwise, I've learnt much from you, but—"

John Stanier ceased his pacing, breaking in on his sentence.

"There's no 'but' for me, Assheton, I can't progress—the struggles and impotencies of other men's lives leave me cold, they can never exceed the past struggles and impotency of my own. I am reconciled to everything in my old age, and I can't understand why you or any one else should wish to open the doors and windows of my life, when I ask for repose, not for fresh disturbances over useless problems."

The opportunity had come.

"There's someone else beside yourself to think of," said Philip boldly. "There's your daughter."

"My children," said Stanier, his voice growing rough with suppressed feeling, "are in occupations and affections divided from me—why do you remind me of this?"

"You can't ignore your own flesh and blood, your daughter's welfare must mean something to you, I know you love her."

"Love her? What has love ever meant to me?—I owe nothing to it. I want no raking up of emotions. Leave me to my books. My daughter is steeped in modernity, she needs neither me nor my antiquated opinion."

The stubborn misery in the schoolmaster's voice gave Assheton courage.

"Believe me, she has need of your antiquated opinions; don't forget also that we are responsible more surely for the life of those depending upon us, than for the satisfaction of our own. Nothing that you can give them out of your books will be at all like what you can give them of yourself. You're frightened of emotions, you may have reason to be so for yourself, but the great fear is for her. As things are, what is your daughter in your life?"

The old man stretched out his arms, his voice quivered.

"The light of my eyes," he cried. "The light of my eyes! Against my better judgment I love her." Then his arms fell heavily to his sides again. "But it's too late, my boy," he said drearily.

"No," persisted Philip, "not too late, for if you love her you can save her now."

"Save her—save her from what—from whom?"

"From an influence strong and plausible, that's poisoning her young life; she's being made a fool of —a dupe."

Stanier stood still on the path. He ran his hand across his brow, looking at Philip; a shadow of fear in his dark, deep-set eyes.

"I'm a fool to love her," he said, "a fool! I loved my boy and he left me. I've loved no one else, since her mother died twenty years ago—God knows, her death lies at my door."

As he made this simple confession, the pathos in his voice touched Assheton to the heart. In spite of John Stanier's great reserve, and his merely vague allusions to his youth, Philip knew the old stories gossipped about in Stoneyard, and had guessed at the wounded soul. Yet now, even as these wounds lay re-opened under his probing words, he could not spare

him. For the sake of the character and the purity of the girl they both loved, he must be made to face the situation. Coward as Stanier was for himself, shrinking from all things that brought remembrance, such cowardice should not demand his daughter in sacrifice. No side issue, such as her wishes in the matter, or of incurring by his interference her increased dislike, prevailed with Assheton as it might have done with a weaker man. He saw only one road to take, and he took it. John Stanier must know, and he must act.

"You'll kill Miss Agnes also," he said gravely, "unless, at a temporary loss of peace and quiet, you strive to bar the way to her further intercourse with Robert Lester. She's utterly in his power."

"Surely this is exaggeration. She tells me he is so occupied. She seems never away from her typewriter. I allow the foolishness of the employment, but the harm is another question. She promised I should meet the man, but she has not arranged the meeting yet."

"A long delay," said Assheton.

"I confess I've not been very pressing in the matter."

"Neither, I suggest, has she."

Stanier looked worried.

"Well, tell me what you know about it—she's happy, isn't she?"

"Too happy, that's just it. She would sell her soul for him, but there will be no question of selling soon, he's stealing it fast enough and we may whistle to get it back."

"She talks a good deal about her socialism," said Stanier, "but I consider it merely the novelty of the thing that has seized her childish imagination. You don't mean to say that she's getting to believe in those absurd doctrines?" he continued, his mind

darting to results, rather than dealing with primary causes.

"About that—it matters little. She may attach herself to any of his vague theories for all the harm it will do her. I would indeed she were a socialist, if she understood something of their propaganda, if socialism made her feel for the many rather than the one. But it's of Robert Lester she thinks, not of Robert Lester's views."

"Hot headed and quickly impressed—how like her poor mother! That she should be logical is more than I could hope."

"It's not a question of logic," muttered Philip impatiently.

"Has this Lester any standing with his party?" questioned the elder man again.

"Standing? Oh, a recruit of his stamp would from one point of view be certain to have standing. I expect they let him do pretty much as he likes, but in truth he's nothing more than a crack-brained revolutionist: his teachings have no ethical basis. Smarting under some personal wrong, he destroys or attempts to destroy for the mere vengeance of the act. Certainly he is one who calls despite upon a great cause."

"What is he like?"

"Strangely interesting. I've met him, but it isn't my business to meet him again. I'm helpless to deal with him, that's why I've come to you, sir."

John Stanier picked a young leaf shooting on the may tree, and crumbled it in his nervous fingers.

"Is the man doing my girl an injury?" he asked between his teeth. "Tell me!"

"All the injury in the world."

"There is no prejudice on your part, no misguided ardour? Don't deny your zeal in these questions."

"I have no desire to deny anything, but it's for

you, not for me, to talk of these things with her, to make her realise her danger."

"I can't, Assheton, I can't," said Stanier huskily.

"Why can't you?—this is not a time for weakness."

The elder man's face worked painfully.

"It was my harshness that killed her mother, don't you understand? I can't be hard with the girl. She thinks me now unsympathetic. I don't wish to drive her from under my roof with fresh interference?"

"Interference!" cried Philip angrily, goaded by Stanier's indecision, "when she's in love with this man — desperately in love. Heavens! isn't that enough to make you act?"

Stanier looked perplexed, he felt Philip was driving him into a corner, his arguments became feeble.

"But he's a gentleman, I think you said. I suppose you mean a gentleman in instinct. If that's the case and she wishes to marry him, how can I prevent it?"

"The man won't marry her. He's indifferent to her, utterly indifferent. For no purpose is he turning her life into dust and ashes."

"Dust and ashes," repeated Stanier, "even as my life has been."

"Your life for yourself may be over. At any-rate you have lived it bravely; but for her—for her you must begin again. She is meant for sunshine, for goodness; don't you feel that? By all your lessons of the past I implore you to make some effort to save her."

From intense earnestness, Philip's eyes welled up with tears. He seized the schoolmaster's hand and by his vice-like grasp, by the expression of his face distorted with entreaty, he revealed his secret.

"You love her too!" cried Stanier involuntarily. "Ah, my God! what wheels within wheels!"

He sank upon the green rustic seat, his face

buried in his hands. Assheton stood, looking grimly round the sunny garden. It mocked him in its beauty. If the father would not act, there was no hope; what had he gained to check his despair? The scent of the violets beneath the wall, and from the snow-white almond tree in the corner, glorious as the queen of the still sleeping bushes, filled his nostrils; mechanically he counted the small fleecy clouds as they sailed over the sky. Was it thus he was to lose her? To yield her to the contempt of another man, to see her head bowed with shame—her sweet face swollen with inconsolable grief? It was more than he could bear! One last effort must be made—he prayed inwardly for its success.

"Mr Stanier," he said gently, "listen to me."

The schoolmaster raised his head. His face had grown younger. The hardness of his mask-like reserve had gone, his eyes seemed to be searching for advice—for guidance.

"Yes," he answered.

"Will you give me a promise? Will you do as I ask?"

"All that you wish."

"I want you on the very first opportunity to speak to your daughter; to convince her that you do share her life more than she believes. There is no need for criticism; on the contrary there is need for all your forgotten tenderness."

Stainer did not speak, so Philip continued.

"If she resents it, as you so dread she will, go to Lester yourself. Underneath the veneer of that man's madness is the groundwork of an old nature that won't be able to deny you; I'm convinced of it. Tell him that she's precious to you; ask him to release her. It will be no sacrifice to him."

A spasm of fear passed over the schoolmaster's

countenance. "What if she will not consent? What if she goes with him?" he ventured hesitatingly.

"She will not go. Something instinctively tells me that. Put the strength of your love into the effort, Mr Stanier, it's worth while."

John Stanier stood up, his tall figure tottered a little.

"Would that it were possible that I could win her," he said, passing his arm into the young man's; "ah, would that it were possible," he added yearningly. They moved towards the house.

Outside the verandah Philip turned to Stanier eagerly. "You mustn't delay long, taking some step—you realize the importance of it, don't you?"

"Yes, my boy, trust me, for your sake—for your sake and for hers. The course to me is terrible, this unlocking of my life. I hardly know how to face it."

The two men passed in, and Agnes, stretching half her body out of a window in the upper storey, strove in vain to attract their attention.

"They've been talking about me," she said to herself. "I read it in their expression. Father looks worried, and Philip was telling him something. I know it could only be about me." She shut the window with a rattle—"How dare they" she cried. "Oh, how dare they!"

CHAPTER X

AGNES LEARNS A NEW LESSON

AFTER all it was Saturday evening when Agnes Stanier went to Oldfield. Lester had sent her the note on the morning after their conversation. He mentioned that the evening was the best time to find his friend, and she, forgetting his advice about Saturday, and instinctively desiring to greet Lester again, with the impression of her new advance in his cause freshly on her mind, chose the night of his intended return from London to Stoneyard.

In sole possession of a third class carriage, she leant back against the drab cushions and watched the twilight spreading mistily over the landscape. Through the open windows the draught ruffled the ribbons in her hat and the loose tendrils of her hair. Her thoughts were full of pleasurable anticipation.

During the preceding week, she had expected everyday some autocratic command, or questioning from her father, the result of the conversation with Philip in the garden. But his demeanour remained as usual. He threw no difficulties in her path. She began to hope that after all she had been mistaken, and that Philip's earnestness was due to a row in the school, or perhaps in some way connected with his departure from Stoneyard. It was impossible that he could wish to stay in the place for ever. Certainly, she reflected, it was not to her credit if he had found his post a bed of roses.

The train sped on. The line wound across undulating fields and under wooded heights, till it descended at last to a flatter country, where clumps of fir trees and stretches of fern and bracken gave place to the coal-pit and flaring iron-works.

As they approached the town, the night became suddenly blacker; huge tongues of orange fire dancing here and there from the wide-mouthed cupolas, disclosed the outlines of disused brick kilns, and heaps of slag and rubbish; the air was surcharged with the strange smelling smoke of many chimneys.

Through the glare of these furnaces and the ever-increasing rows of houses, the train shot into a tunnel. When they came out on the other side the gas jets had multiplied, and the signs of population were more numerous. A heavy rain had begun to patter on the roof of the railway carriage. Agnes noticed that the people in the streets below, hurrying along the slippery pavement, held their umbrellas low, and battled with the storm at every corner. Her nerves tingled from the noise and movement of the active life into which she was being carried, and when the train, screaming and jolting over the points, steamed into the station, her heart beat with excitement.

She left the door of the carriage swinging, and hesitating a moment on the platform, pushed her way through the crowd and went into the refreshment room. She had departed from home with no prospect of supper; for, shrinking from the possibility of her father's questioning, she had refrained from even an allusion to her errand. Now, she was hungry.

A few loafers around the bar, eyed her for a moment over the glasses at their lips as she made her wants known and turned away again to one of the little marble tables scattered about under the gas chandeliers.

She felt so independent, so enveloped in a sense of importance—she almost wished that something would betray the magnitude of the matter she had in hand to the bar-maid, or to the commercial traveller waiting with his pony of beer for the 8.8 to Manchester.

"What will Griffiths think of me, this leader of the people," she mused in her young conceit, "will he talk to me as one who understands the meaning of a great organisation—as if I were let into the secrets of a great movement? Will he be like Robert Lester?" Her thoughts doubled back to the afternoon in the churchyard. She heard again, not the satirical quibbling with words, but only Lester's confidential tone as he laid this task so lightly upon her, when she seemed at once, leaving out of all account her past failure, bound to him and to his cause by an oath of eternal allegiance. They should fight their own battle from out their own camp, she resolved proudly, and win it too, not only for Stoneyard, but for bigger, wider issues throughout the world. Why should they beg of Assheton and his set, why compromise in any way their convictions? Lester must ever be the leader, Lester the victor.

"Your tea, Miss."

The voice at her elbow broke in upon her imaginings. Lost to the buzz of conversation around her, she drank off the hot tea and munched the thick bread and butter. Soon a bell rang, and a head thrust between the doors delivered a stentorian direction. Almost immediately came the sound of a train lumbering into the station; the refreshment room emptied, and she, recalled to the present by the silence of her surroundings, pulled her hat straight in front of the chimney-glass, and went out also.

For a minute she stood looking at the people and

things in the great station. It seemed to her oddly that in the medley of figures there moved a familiar form, that she saw the soft hat and drooping shoulders of Nicholas Clulow; but the formation of the ever-moving crowd altered, and the impression passed.

"It's impossible," she said to herself, and went on boldly into the town.

The night was exceptionally stormy; rain fell in driving sheets, the wind howled. Up the middle of the road the tramcar was puffing its hideous bulk; she began to run and flung herself into it, to find, between an unwashed miner and a small boy with a market basket, an uncomfortable seat. As she crouched there in the close atmosphere, breathing in the steam of hot bodies and damp clothes, her keen enjoyment of the situation began to fail. The tram stopped continually to empty its cargo and re-fill again. Along the streets the unshuttered shops displayed their wares in a glare of gas; and high above each tram station the pale, calm electric light cast ghost-like shadows on the faces of the men and women, who, contemptuous of the tempest in their familiarity with it, lounged and chaffed or fought playfully, swashing in and out of the public houses with sodden boots. Overhead, the water spurted from the sloping roofs, and swelled the gutter rivers gurgling through the grids to the drain pipe.

"Observation Terrace," cried the conductor at last. The tram had stopped at the terminus.

Agnes gathered up her wet skirts and picked her way ankle-deep through the mud, towards a block of new houses built under a smouldering heap of slag, full in the teeth of the east wind. Ever a prey to her quick-changing moods, she felt, as she knocked at No. 3, depressed and uneasy.

A servant maid with a fringe in curl papers and a

smutty cheek peered out to search for the disturber of her peace. Agnes addressed her.

"Mr Griffiths—I've called to see Mr Griffiths." For answer, the smutty face broadened into a grin.

"He's in, isn't he?"

"Mebbe 'ey is an' mebbe 'ey isna," was the impudent rejoinder. "An' w'at bey yew wantin' wi' 'im?"

"I don't think he can be out," Agnes answered stiffly, "he expects me—I sent him a telegram. I must catch the train back in an hour—so please"—but she was speaking to the empty air; the girl had retreated into the back premises of the house, leaving the door ajar; after an interval she returned, and from the kitchen an odour of onions and musty cheese followed her.

"Well," Agnes persisted, "can I see him?"

"Oi didna' goo fer t'arsk 'im."

The situation offered an excuse for the utmost exasperation. In her anger Agnes exaggerated the dignity of her manner. "Look here, I insist on an answer. My name is Miss Stanier—I've come from Stoneyard—from Mr Robert Lester. Surely Mr Griffiths has given you some instructions for me?"

The idiotic grin spread again over the slavey's countenance. She struck her arms akimbo.

"Once upon a time—a sodger—a sodger
Said 'is name was Jacky Jones when it was Eli Podger,"

she hummed.

"Call your master," cried Agnes imperatively.

"Yew are a good un, yew are. Mi Maister! Ho, Ho!"

"Am I to see him then or am I not? If I've come to the wrong house I must find the right one. I don't intend standing here all night."

The servant felt the rain dripping on the back

of her neck; she understood also that in the face of so much determination she would probably be worsted in this war of words. With a sweeping courtesy of mock respect she threw the door wide open.

"Yew con say 'im if'n yew loike. Oh, ay, yew con say 'im. 'Ey ain't opened yewn telegram yit—'e's pretty fer gone, 'ey is, but if yew want to coom in—coom in!"

Her visitor had little time even to conjecture the meaning of this sentence. The inner door had been opened, and she had been rushed nameless into a room; with an ejaculation of "wake they, Jacko lad, ere's a 'igh flyer," directed at someone or something, and a flick of her dirty apron over the mahogany back of a dilapidated horse-hair chair, the maid vanished.

Entering from the outer darkness, Agnes stood blinking in the dim light. She tried to distinguish the objects in the room, and above all the occupant, and was ever expectant of his greeting. The things around her became at last more defined, and she knew that a man was sitting at a centre table. His arms were stretched out over the greasy red baize table cover; on one his head rested, the nerveless fingers of his right hand just touching an uncorked black bottle which, flanked by a couple of dirty glasses and the shrivelled half of a lemon in a saucer, formed part of an irregular group of five. The atmosphere was full of a sickening smell of stale spirits.

He raised his head slowly, and his heavy, filmy eyes rested upon the girl. With an effort at self-command, he pulled himself up in his chair, half rose from it, then slipped weakly back again.

"Sit down," he said thickly, with a vague wave of his hand.

Agnes stood immoveable. With this haunting

image, flushed of cheek and swollen of lip before her, she felt as if she had no strength to stir; she clung to the certain vantage which she gained while towering above him; no power on earth, she decided, should make her sit down. What was the matter with this man that he filled her with repulsion? Drink? The idea was preposterous. She remembered his occupation—Lester's testimonial as to his character. No, he was ill, dreadfully, horribly ill.

"Do you hear me," he growled again—"sit down. Where d'you come from?"

She made an effort to find her voice and faltered.

"I'm afraid I've chosen an awfully inconvenient time. I hope you'll excuse me, but Mr Lester asked me to bring a message—if I'd only known you weren't well—" she broke off. What was the use of talking—the man was not listening, his eyes were closing—his head nodding forward; as her voice ceased, he jerked it up again spasmodically.

"Can't you speak out?" he said sleepily.

She remembered the note she had brought with her. In a sudden desperation she fumbled for it in her pocket, and pushed it silently across the table. He took the envelope between his clumsy fingers and dropped it—groped for it again—and this time with a spurt of self-possession opened it untidily, and spread the letter out before him. With a kind of fascination, the girl watched him as he turned and re-turned the pages abstractedly. When at last he crumpled it up and brought his hand down with a little thump upon the paper, she realised that he had missed every word.

The situation was becoming impossible. She looked round the room, badly furnished and hopelessly uncomfortable; a fire burnt out in the grate, above it the mantel-piece, adorned with a dirty newspaper cut into scallops, and empty bottles,

burnt matches, torn novelettes and pamphlets heaped upon it. A vision of Lester's study at Stoneyard in its attractive comfort rose for comparison before her. This man might be a social democrat, he might be an eloquent speaker, but he was dirty, common, ill. Why had Lester let her come to such a place? Why hadn't he told her what sort of person this was? Why did he paint quite another being in his description? It was a shame to keep the truth from her. She had still the message to give, and she felt that its quick delivery would probably offer the only excuse for escape. She spoke in a loud voice as if addressing a deaf man.

"I've come from Mr Lester—Mr Lester, who's helping the strikers in Stoneyard. He asked me to tell you that we want a rallying of forces at a meeting next week or the week after. He's afraid that the men will accept bad terms from the masters, or go in on the old wage, the funds of the Union are very low—the dyers' Union I mean—he thinks that if you came and made a speech it might spur them on a bit."

The irony of the words in the circumstances was positively painful. Her face, as she waited his answer, grew very white. He threw back his unsteady head and hiccoughed, it was obvious that he had only partially understood her.

"Goo' fellow, Lester," he murmured, "goo' fellow, always in a fright about somethin'—no more money down here—when's he goin' to send money?—"

She made no reply.

"When's he goin' to send money, I shay?" he persisted irritably.

"That's a matter for you to settle with him," answered the girl. "I know nothing about it."

She held the table with both hands; a strange faintness seized her—the room seemed desperately cold.

"That's all well enough," threatened Griffiths, in a temporary access of recollection. "He's got his pockets full of gold, they're all ready to sthand by him and be friends—sends me as del'gate to Birmingham and the sec'ry tells me they'll not want my services after this month, that I'm too warm for them—warm 'em up, I say, warm 'em up, the snivelling devils. I've talked for their bloomin' cause till my throat's dry and not a bob left."

Then it was that all self-deception fled from Agnes Stanier, that she knew the helpless drunkenness of this man, who was pitiably laying bare his real nature before her. Against this new and undesired knowledge she rebelled wildly, and sickened by disappointment and uncertainty, all hope and faith in her evening's mission, even for the nonce in Lester, left her.

"Where's my money, I shay?" Griffiths hiccoughed again, relapsing from his momentary sobriety and stretching out his hand for the bottle. The whisky gurgled from it into the glass. Agnes leant forward.

"Don't," she cried, her voice trembling, "don't drink that stuff, don't—do you hear me? Pull yourself together, try to be a man. You'll hate it so to-morrow, that I've seen you like this."

This rôle of guardian angel struck her, even at so grim a moment, as a strange development. The man gulped down half the contents of the glass, but at her earnest entreaty left the remainder untouched. With unsteady hand he pulled the paper shade from the lamp, and stared at the girl. She could see him more plainly now, could see he was a man of not yet forty, and that in spite of the vacancy of his expression and his discoloured lips and complexion, that there was pretension in the cast of his features, and possible power in his well-shaped, bald forehead.

"Have a drink?" he said jocosely, holding up the glass to her with palsied grip. "Let's drink to the cause—the cause of the people. Damnation to the teetotallers, to the parsons—" then in a sudden craving he drew the glass back to his mouth, but it slipped from his hand and broke to pieces on the brick floor. For a second he groped aimlessly after the fragments, then appearing to forget them, he attempted to rise from his chair, and move towards the girl.

"Are you Lester's lass?" he said with a wink,—"lucky dog. A damned finer girl than we get down here. Does he keep you for the party or for your pretty eyes?"

The blood darkened her face and she clenched her hands. What was the use of standing parleying with this sot? As his brain cleared his tipsy insolence was worse than his stupor. Soon the fumes of the fresh draught of whisky would mount to his head—she would be lucky if she could escape his insults. She remembered the slavey's jesting; after all, in her coarse way, she had tried to save her from this; why had she not been warned? Now in the bitterness of her disappointment, Agnes turned, in the desire to rush madly from the house, anywhere, to escape from this one-sided interview, once and for all. Trembling with fear and anger she managed to reach the door.

"I'm going to tell Mr Lester what a scandal you are to our cause," she cried. "I didn't expect an interview with a drunkard. If you're ever capable of an answer, don't send it. He'll never want you again."

The disgust in her voice was so apparent that it affected even her listener.

"What's that you're sayin'?" he said roughly. "Think I'm drunk, do you. Come, that's pretty strong. You must put up with what you find, my

lady. We're men up here, we are. No dirty whining water-drinkers, by Gad—drunk!—tell Lester to keep his airs and graces for himself—airs and graces, that's my message," he struggled for his words, the fumes of the spirit beginning their fresh attack. Standing at his full height, his shoulders working in an effort to keep a balance, a purple flush of rage spread all over his face.

"Go," he shouted savagely, as the girl still fumbled with the stiffness of the door handle. "Go, I tell you —go," and even before she had reached the lobby he had seized one of the bottles menacingly. "Confound your impertinence, I'll make you go," she heard him shriek, as it smashed itself to pieces on the door panel. But he had come to the end of his force. He staggered, pulled himself together with difficulty, staggered again, and clutching at the table cover slipped back heavily on the edge of the chair, and from the chair, with smothered curses, fell an invertebrate heap upon the floor.

Terror lent wings to her feet. Agnes rushed past the servant, grinning as usual, at the key hole, out of the house and down the street, her hands pressed to her ears as if the very echo of her footsteps appalled her. The street dipped down the hill steeply, but she, heeding nothing except the knowledge that safety lay only in the light and bustle of the town, raced on, her skirts swinging through the mud. Once, thinking to achieve a short cut, she turned by mistake into a narrow lane and found herself in a cul de sac. Her hand, stretched out appealingly, touched only the dark hard wall. The utter stillness and desertion of the spot filled her with fresh horror. Apparitions of possible assassins leaping upon her from every corner, peopled her brain, her panting breath as she ran back was broken by childish sobs of fear; only in the wind and rain, which had before appeared so formidable, she realised undeni-

able proofs of liberty. Not, however, till human voices in talk and laughter echoed round her; not till the bright reflected lights of the main streets showed her people stopping to watch her mad career, did she slacken speed, and full of shame and misery, lean gasping and exhausted against a lamp-post.

The light fell full on her troubled eyes and damp face. At that instant a hand was laid upon her shoulder; with a slight scream at this fresh alarm, she turned to see the bent figure of a man beside her—his face half hidden by the turned up collar of a long overcoat.

"Nicholas!"—she ejaculated, "you—you?"

Like a couple of half drowned rats, the rain glistening on them and dropping from every angle of their figures, they stood together. After all, it was his form that she had seen moving through the crowd at the station. At the girl's exclamation he put his finger to his lips.

"Sh——sh!" he said, "sh——sh!"

"Don't—don't Nicholas," she gasped, shivering. "I can't bear it."

"I knew you'd come," he wheezed. "It's the Lord's dealings. It seemed as if an angel from Heaven were flying down the hill—but they mustn't know it—they mustn't know it. My cup's too full. I dare not risk the robbing of my joy."

The girl tossed back her wet curls. She looked at his strange gleaming eyes.

"Who's not to know what?"—she cried—"who's listening on such a night? Don't stand there like a spectre hissing out these things. I'm frightened, miserable, wretched—Nicholas, be human for once. I've had such an awful time."

But he was not listening to her. Looking around him cautiously, he drew from his pocket a newspaper, soaked almost to a pulp.

"It's here," he said. "Here—here—where I wanted it—the Lord be praised—a column and a half and my name printed at the bottom—read, read." He thrust the paper into her hand and held her arm as he pointed to the heading.

The girl pushed the paper away roughly. "I can't read anything—what's more, I won't. You see what a state I'm in, you're making thing's worse—a hundred times worse."

Her fear had been waning, but it returned. The street seemed so empty. Presently she would be left alone with Nicholas, and he was mad—quite mad. Somehow or other she must make him speak and act sanely; or how would the night end?

"You've got to help me," she continued hysterically, as he stood muttering and peering into the newspaper. "There's no one else to help. At this minute I'm absolutely dependent on you. I'm desperately tired and cold, I can't think for myself. You must be sensible, Nicholas, and give up whatever mischief you have in view and take me somewhere, where it's warm and quiet. Shall we go to the station till the train goes? We must both get home to-night."

The paper dropped on to the pavement.

"Dependent upon me?" he said ecstatically, "dependent upon me," he repeated as if his ears deceived him.

"Yes, upon you," she said in a decided voice. "I can't stay out another minute in this deluge. You've got to find shelter."

A dawning perception of her need appeared at last in his face.

"The shelter of the Father's house. The answer to prayer is coming truly—the wandering sheep will be in the fold to-night."

"Home to Stoneyard, that's where I want to go," said Agnes, stamping her feet and crying in

earnest. "Don't be silly, Nicholas—don't quote texts to me. I think I'm going to faint."

"No, no," he said solemnly, drawing his arm through hers, as she staggered a little, "this is no physical trouble, but the working of the spirit. We'll come together to find the rest and peace you need, now, this very night, as I've always prayed we should find it together. Come, come," and he began to draw her gently down the street.

In truth her head was whirling and her heart beating strangely; over-wrought, trembling with cold and wet, she let him have his way, powerless to resist. Leaning against his thin shoulder, lifting her feet as if they were blocks of stone, she followed him.

To Nicholas a strength and self-importance had come. To have her here beside him, weak, clinging, trusting, seemed too good to be true. His lips in spiritual fervour moved in prayer. As he hurried her along, he forgot all cold and wet, burning with the zeal of his mission.

They entered the covered and brilliantly lighted market, the diverse wares heaped upon the open counters, the vendors snatching on Saturday night the forbidden gain of Sunday. The place was full of buyers, sellers, and loungers sheltering from the storm. These sought the excitement of a week end's row in tentative horse-play round the oyster bars. Little babies blinked out from their mothers' shoulders at the gas light, their tiny faces in intense need of sleep, looking shrunken and old. Small children ran here and there, ducking between men's legs, to fill their mouths with clams or "tripe and cow heel," and tossing the half-pence from their dirty fists in payment across the slabs.

Everywhere this bartering and buying, the wrapping of dried fish in paper, the parcelling out of vegetables and hunks of unpalatable looking meat; amidst these new sights and sounds, Agnes felt

comfort returning; her blood began to circulate again.

It was reassuring, this practical crowd, far more reassuring than Nicholas and his vagaries. Her footsteps lagged, she tried to slip from his side, but his hand gripped hers with tenacity.

"Away," he beseeched, "don't linger here. Rest and peace are what you need—not this pandemonium." Too weak to resist, she yielded and went on with him reluctantly.

They passed in their walk through a network of small streets, the houses for the most part low, but irregular in outline and leaning together.

In some streets stillness reigned. In others, from the unseen courts and alleys that, like rabbit warrens, pierced through every vacant space and formed the back yard of many a house, came shrieks, shouts and hoarse oaths.

The girl, with all physical feelings numbed, tripped and stumbled along. He led her with determination —now turning a sharp corner and passing from gloom to gloom—now emerging into an open space where giant hoardings rose beyond the houses, and the shapes of caravans, and of circus paraphernalia on waste ground, could be distinguished by the light of the distant ironworks which, flaming across the sky, were reflected here and there in the water of the puddles and ruts of the road.

The very nature of her surroundings but increased her uneasiness. Her ears were dull with singing noises, her pulses throbbed painfully.

Presently the brilliant glare from a large public house shone out across their path. The door opened and shut continually. Within was music and singing—people dancing, joking, yelling with laughter. On a man's knee a girl sat, her arm round his neck, and in his flushed cheeks, in the imbecility of his expression, Agnes observed a start-

ling resemblance to Griffiths, the man from whom she had fled. Looking at him, she stopped.

"That man!" she said breathlessly. "Do you see him there—in there?" She pointed. "He's drunk, dreadfully drunk, but the girl doesn't mind—she—ah!" the door had swung to again.

Nicholas averted his head. "The devil's charnel-house," he muttered, "the devil's charnel-house," and he swept her on to mingle with a small crowd filing up the steps of a square brick building almost adjoining the tavern.

He drew aside a plum-coloured curtain and they passed through a narrow door into the dim light of a large hall.

It was warm inside—very warm: Agnes felt this with satisfaction.

She sank down on a wooden bench as far from other people as she could. Nicholas, she just noticed, fell on his knees. Why he did this, or why they had come here at all, was too great an exertion to consider. She sat upright, wearily wishing in the strange tiredness which was overwhelming her, for a back of some sort on the bench, to lean against, that she might sleep and lose all knowledge. What puzzled her was that the people who had come in with them, and who had been close to her seemed far away now, black pigmies moving up and down but never approaching, and on the large white-faced clock on the wall, the hands and figures were blurred. She was faintly conscious of the desire that this had been the station, and the hour of their train's departure, she was desirous too to make Nicholas understand that the train would be missed if he didn't hail a fly, that she would have no strength to wait for the tram-car at the street corner. But she did nothing, absolutely nothing, sitting still and dreaming out these actions. It was stupid, this weariness, but she could not resist it, and

ever before her feverish imagination rose the face of the drunkard in the tavern—the face of the drunken man on the hill.

She remembered his hateful words, and the havoc he had wrought with her hopes and beliefs, and mingled with these thoughts came crowding accusations against Lester. Fight against them as she would, they struggled to be heard. How cruel it seemed that the hand she blessed was the hand that gave her the blow, the man who had shown her the greatest good and the possibility of the greatest happiness, must yet be the one to call to her vision, the apparitions of evil, ugliness, and sorrow. Apparitions which she wished to keep as phantoms, but which grew ever more tangible, bringing with them the supreme menace that even as they had sucked the life-blood from others, they too might suck the life from her.

She remembered going to the sea-side one summer time—her love of the blue sea all calm and glistening with the colours of the rock, the sea weeds, and the pale sand reflected from below. How, when the soft breezes blew, she had adored that sea, as, green and amethyst, it carried rolling white crests, to dash in shining foam against the pier wall. She revelled in those changes—the varying beauty that still was always beauty. And the thought too of league on league of this sea stretching to the unknown, thrilled her through and through. Then one morning when the wind had blown a terrific storm all night, she had gone out expecting to see everything more beautiful, more entrancing than ever, and she had met a lot of women upon the road, crying. They told her that a man and a baby, drowned and stark, had been washed ashore, that the man was quite young in death and had the baby clasped in his arms; that a big ship had been wrecked on the point. She remembered her sudden

fright as she saw the procession of fishermen walking, carrying their sad burden up the cliffs, and the sea was ugly that day—grey, dull, covered with driftwood, and black weed. How she had hated it then, furious with its deception, in the vividness of her imagination, fighting at the horror it brought her—at the disappointment.

Amid such thoughts her mind rambled confusedly. It was strange that she should see the picture of that childish time so clearly before her to-night. All the ugly things that she wished to forget she remembered — this night, that other night in the dyer's cottage, her unsuccessful interview with Philip, all that ought to be forgotten stung her brain cruelly with recollection, threatening to turn her life from a fairy tale into a tragedy. Surely it was only the strangeness of this place, the unfamiliarity of her surroundings, that affected her overstrung nerves; she would get up and go; yet she felt that an invisible power had chained her to one spot, and in spite of all effort on her part, that a fence was slowly ringing round her. Not quite round her—but growing every moment. She stretched out her hands to touch the encompassment, to tear it down, to drag it up—to—she awoke with a frightened start: even as her thoughts had raced each other, she had been dozing fitfully.

With a sigh of relief, she moved a little on her seat. Her limbs were aching to distraction; she felt stiff, wretched, she had no sensation in her feet. People were grouped around her on chairs — on forms — standing even. She saw a man pacing about in front on a platform and gesticulating He was tall, and his powerful voice came towards her over the heads of the throng. Brilliant jets of light from somewhere lit up his face; beads of perspiration stood on his forehead and trickled slowly down into his black beard.

Agnes tried to gather her wits together to follow what he was saying, but her breath seemed to fail her in the unwholesome atmosphere, her heart fluttered irregularly. All effort was painful. At last she heard his words.

"Blind insensate sinners," he was saying, "will nothing rouse you? Will nothing make you flee from the wrath to come? I tell you the time is very near, one can almost hear the echo of the chariot wheels bearing the Judge of all men. Unclean every one of you, down on your knees for grace at the mercy seat."

His words jangled like discordant notes in her ears, but try as she might she could not escape the earnestness of the speaker's gaze. She was dominated by him. He was speaking at her, to her only. What did he care for the other people in the hall? It was for her — Agnes Stanier — that he was pleading, or was it her that he was cursing? He was coming towards her, wasn't he? Yes. Creeping ever nearer and nearer, sliding over the platform. Now like a snake he waved his long arms; a snake, she knew, coiled and coiled till it strangled people. She wondered vaguely if she was strangled now, whether her soul like some butterfly would leave her body, and if like a butterfly it would fly towards the light mistaking it for the sun, and get shrivelled up in one of the gas jets. Or would the sun shine really, and grow bigger and bigger, and burn up all these people, and give its light for her alone?

"What nonsense all this is," she thought dreamily, "what nonsense," but to put her thoughts into sequence seemed entirely beyond her.

Her fixed, frightened gaze wandered at last. A woman in front shook with suppressed moans. A youth near her wept audibly, and on her left, with his hat off, but still with his wet over-coat buttoned up

closely, Nicholas swayed backwards and forwards, praying excitedly.

A choking sensation made her throat ache. Round and round the room turned with the people in it, like a St Catherine's wheel. She was no longer sitting on a seat, she was suspended in mid-air, and yet the preacher's voice went on continually. She was in hell, oh yes, that was where she was, but Nicholas could save her; he had been saved long ago.

The flames leapt and danced and died again before her eyes. Around and below her there was a soft, clammy thing—oh! the coils of the serpent. Was this then the end?

"Nicholas, Nicholas," she whispered, but her voice sounded to her like a shout. "Nicholas, I'm dying —Nicholas!"

Thank God, no hell could go on for ever. He had turned at last.

"Save me," she screamed, "save me," and by the cessation of the preacher's voice, by a shuffling movement and division in the crowd, and a sudden whispering hum—all the congregation knew that a person in the hall had swooned.

CHAPTER XI

BARRIERS

IT is perhaps well for us that life is divided into spaces; even as we grieve at the monotony of some of its enclosures, we come suddenly upon the door of the unexpected, and pass to fresh experiences with an ardour that in equal recklessness courts tears or joy. Human beings are constructed to meet the eternal law of change, and in spite of our strenuous denial, this fact cripples emotion as a dominating power, whether for gladness or for sorrow. As to-day we sob and suffer, so to-morrow we smile and forget.

Agnes, sitting up in bed at ten o'clock in the morning and languidly peeling an orange, remembered her strange night and its sensations, much as on Friday we remember Wednesday's nightmare. She had been ill for a week, uncomfortably, painfully ill; only a strong constitution warded off an attack of rheumatic fever. But the worst was past. She felt the pleasant glow of returning strength, and marshalling past events before her in review-order, she conjured up fresh battalions of imaginations to cope with the times to come. Yet, try as she would to recall her old persuasions, she felt that they had passed beyond her reach, she looked out with startled eyes on a different world of ideas, she was conscious of a disarray in her opinions, conscious of unpleasant misgivings shadowing her rosiest plans. Certainties seemed to have become uncertainties, realities unrealities, and with no one to offer her re-

assurance, to meet her enquiry, "Is everything just the same?" with the answer, "Yes, yes, just the same now and ever," her spirits fell. She laid her orange down untasted, and tossed restlessly amongst her white pillows. For a time she remained alone, then she heard steps upon the landing. John Stanier opened the door very cautiously, and came into the room.

The sight of her father brought vividly to mind the events of the fatal night. There had been no surreptitious stealing into the school-house, no excuses next morning for having shirked the supper table. The door bell had to be rung and Stanier faced an hour before midnight. She smiled even now at the remembrance of herself, as she lay weakly on the sofa, sipping brandy; Nicholas, at her side, sobbing and helpless with excitement and cold; and the three old ladies whose services he had enlisted to escort them home, talking in voluble thankfulness of the "dear brand snatched from the burning." How angry her father had been, and how he had scolded Nicholas, and with what scant ceremony and poor appreciation of their revivalist fervour had he ushered the ladies back to the fly, without even inquiring as to whether or no there was a train to convey them to Oldfield.

On the wretched, hot tumbling days afterwards, Stanier had come to her room and had spoken to her now and then with unexpected gentleness; she had felt, however, too ill to respond, and allowed him to continue in the belief that Nicholas was to blame, that they had been participators in the same crime. After all, nothing very much mattered except the fact that she must get well and return quickly to her work. Lester would have missed her this week. She knew there was much to get through, if only, she thought fearfully, he hadn't enlisted somebody else to do the work, if only her services were still needed. On no former

occasion had she desired so greatly to see Lester. She was angry with him, and yet longed to hear his voice, to re-assure her; his explanations, to restore her shaken confidence.

"Shall I close the shutters for you? That light must make your head ache." Her father was speaking now. She sank deeper into the bed and turned her head slowly.

"No, you needn't close the shutters, thank you."

"You're better to-day—much better, the Doctor says."

"I suppose so."

He put down the soup beside her, and went across the room to stir the fire.

"Don't make up the fire," she said, when he had got the poker in his hand, "the room is terribly hot as it is."

He turned to her bed at once.

"I don't want to disturb you," he said.

Agnes leant upon her elbow and reached out a hand for the soup.

"How's Nicholas?" she asked carelessly.

"Very ill. His cough is terrible. We're anxious about him."

"Poor old beggar."

"When you're about again you might go and read to him. He's always asking for you."

"Oh, I don't know if I really can. I'm sure Nicholas looks dreadful in bed."

Her father was ostensibly looking through a book he had taken from the chest of drawers. He did not answer.

"I'm coming downstairs this afternoon," she went on, watching the effect of her words over the edge of the cup.

He put the book back in its place. "Coming downstairs, are you?" he remarked. "That's hardly wise. You'll run the risk of a fresh chill. Remember the Doctor advised your room for the present."

"Doctors are geese. They always think they know such a lot about one, with their impossible restrictions and medicines. I shan't get well if I'm cooped up here. Besides, I've got my engagement."

"What engagement?" said her father.

"My typewriting, of course," and she clattered her cup into its saucer.

There was a moment's pause, then Stanier turned and spoke with determination.

"Agnes," he said, "I've always made it a rule to leave you as much freedom as possible. You know that, don't you? You know that I've given you more independence than in any way agreed with my wishes?"

"Oh, I know all that."

"Well, now I have a favour to ask you. I've no wish to restrict your natural energy for work or your interest in the things going on around you, but I wish you to give up your engagement with Mr Lester. If you like typewriting or literary work, I could get plenty for you to do, copying authors' manuscripts, and so on."

"Thank you very much, but I'd rather stick to what I'm doing."

"It's a waste of time. I wish you to have wholesome and more profitable employment. What does Mr Lester pay you?"

Agnes flushed scarlet. She leant over the bed to pick up a tea-spoon, and raised her face defiantly.

"Don't know—I don't bother about it."

"But surely you must have some idea."

"Why, the usual terms, I suppose—how mercenary you are."

"Leaving the question of money alone," he continued half apologetically, "I repeat that it isn't a suitable employment for you."

"Why not?"

"To begin with, it's unwomanly to be at the beck

and call of such a man. Then it's unintellectual—it's—" he broke off, adding hastily, "my dear child, I don't wish it, that's enough. I beg of you to agree to my wishes."

There was a certain note of appeal in his voice that gave the girl the advantage. She remembered the talk in the garden, and felt that her father was acting under persuasion, fully aware in her inmost heart that he must dislike this close quarter engagement. She would let him fence with words for a little—but the ultimate victory should be hers.

"I suppose it's the old story; Mr Lester's a socialist, and a socialist to you is a criminal."

He fell into the trap she laid for him to bring their argument away from the personal to the abstract.

"Socialism! a net-work of false reasoning and false doctrines, possessing a literature without sense or style. I pity any one whose mind is poisoned with such dangerous rubbish."

"Gracious!" she exclaimed in mock astonishment. "What terrible experiences have you had while I've been laid up? Have you peeped behind the closed doors of secret societies, or has Philip Assheton been feeding you on his milk-and-water reforms in the slums, tell me?"

He answered her very quietly.

"It's hardly a matter for jest," he said. "I dislike for one moment interfering with your life, but as my daughter, I consider the position you're holding a most unsatisfactory one."

"I know who's been putting you up to this," retorted the girl warmly. "I know who's been abusing Mr Lester to you. It's always the same mischief-maker—Philip Assheton."

"If you wish to know if I have discussed this important matter with Philip, I certainly have."

"Ah, so I thought. He's given up arguing with

me face to face, and he chooses this under-hand method of revenging himself—it's hateful!"

"I see nothing hateful about it. He said only what was good for you, and of you."

"That's all very well. I know what's good for myself a great deal better than anybody else. There seems to be a sort of cabal against me, between you."

"You're mistaken—quite mistaken."

"Well, you believe in Philip. You should only hear him laying down the law on labour questions, and buttering up the work-people. You say Mr Lester talks nonsense—he's not in it with Philip."

"I daresay; but pray remember that as regards socialism Philip Assheton and I are miles apart. You should allow me sufficient intelligence to make my own deductions."

"It's too bad of him," she continued, unheeding, "he runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds. He wants to keep well with the people and the employers, and he brings out all sorts of fine ideas to make this possible to himself. He takes such precious good care of his reputation."

"He's right to do that."

"Why should he? Robert Lester says exactly what he thinks and doesn't care a rap as to what people say about him."

"And is that also your ambition in life—to say exactly what you think and not to care what people say about you?"

"Yes, it's the only honest course, isn't it?"

"Even if what you think is false, and what people think about you is true?"

"If I'm persuaded the thing is right, why let myself be persuaded that it's wrong?"

"That's obstinacy," said her father, "and the road to ruin."

The girl was mute. Then she spoke again irritably.

"You're very tiresome," she said, "and I don't understand you. I'd like to know who has ever been able to alter any of your determinations. Can't we leave off talking? I'm so tired."

"I'm sorry you're tired. It's so unnecessary to make a discussion of the matter. Let me take it for granted, that you will think over what I've said, and on the first opportunity will do what I ask you?"

"Oh, don't, don't," she cried in a choking voice. "How can you be so cruel as to expect me to? Why do you all want to make me so miserable—to take away the only thing that makes life possible in this beastly place?"

Stanier stood close beside her bed, his hand moved backwards and forwards, smoothing the quilt that covered her; his stern eyes looked into distance.

"So you're tired of the place—tired of me? Without this occupation you would have to leave it, and leave me also; it's only what I feared."

The girl half closed her lids, drawing herself from under his touch.

"Oh, I daresay you'd be very glad to get rid of me. I'm only a thorn in your side, of course. If my mother had been alive," she added bitterly, as an after-thought, "she must have understood me."

Stanier's face shadowed with pain.

"Your mother! Ah, I don't think so; I don't think she would have understood you—she was much too like you."

He looked at the girl yearningly; if in that instant she had turned to him he would have taken her in his arms and poured out all his longings on her behalf; but she had buried her face amongst the pillows, and without another word he lifted the empty cup and went out of the room.

Wearily he walked down the stairs and into his little study.

"I've done my best," he said to himself, "what more can I do? There has never been any hope for me." He remembered Assheton's advice telling him to go direct to Lester, and he shrank from the thought. "Why should I tell him that I want my girl? Why should he learn my secret? The whole thing is useless, useless."

Stanier felt his purpose weakening as he harboured these reflections. Yet notwithstanding, he knew that his promise to Assheton could not so easily be fulfilled—that a harder path still lay before him.

Upstairs Agnes moaned in a paroxysm of sobs, wrapping herself in imaginary misery. A sudden picture of what a mother's love might have meant, mirrored itself in her mind—the indulgence—the caresses of it. An impulse rose within her to call her father back, to compel him to stay and tell her all the story of this woman she so resembled.

"Father," she cried, "father," but her voice in its shrill weakness received no response. She heard the sound of his footsteps as he moved about the room below.

"I'm sick of being misunderstood, sick of being made unhappy," she cried between her sobs. "Why am I to be hedged in by horrid regulations—and everlasting dullness—why—why?"

A thought checked her wailing. As it grew she left off biting the pillow-case, and throwing back the clothes, slipped out of bed.

By clambering upon the wide window-sill she could see out into the street and obtain a glimpse of Lester's house with its clean stone steps and wrought-iron area railings. Sitting only in her nightgown and pink flannel bed jacket, she shivered a little, and drew her bare right foot under her as she held the left in the palm of her hand.

"Let's see," she calculated, "to-day is Saturday—yes, by Tuesday my legs won't feel like cotton wool

and my head like a balloon. If father won't argue with me and fret me, by Tuesday I shall be strong again and I shall see Robert Lester, as if they could stop me doing that. After all, it's all I care about—it's no good pretending it isn't." A sudden repugnant memory came to her—"I wish I knew him really better. He's so strange, so uncertain. I wonder if after all the cause is as splendid as I want to have it. I wonder if—oh, how I hate wondering—but I only see his face and I suppose I expect every one else to be like him ; how impossible of me. Will he write to me? He might have written before now. What's he doing—ah!"

The maid looked round the screen, searching the empty bed. She held a note in her hand.

A couple of bounds and Agnes was between the sheets again.

"Oh, miss, how foolish of you."

"Oh, Emily, you darling," she cried, seizing the letter in her damp little hand.

But Emily, without elation, put some hot water on the washstand and went downstairs grumbling. And quite alone at last, with her heart beating quickly, Agnes read what Lester had written.

"DEAR MISS STANIER,—I am glad to hear from Doctor Rose that you are much better. What an unlucky illness. You must have chosen a bad night for your expedition. I took advantage of your absence to stay a day or two longer in London. I'm afraid we shan't get any more help for the strike from the socialist headquarters or from the Trade Unionists. The masters are going to offer a compromise, I understand,—that's Assheton's doing. He's played the game very cleverly. They will probably meet the leaders of the Union next week. We ought to get our meeting in first, but there's no hope of putting fresh life and courage into the strikers just now.

I can't understand not having had a line from Griffiths since your interview with him. I am anxious to hear if he's coming. There's an accumulation of work, but I've not had the pluck to tackle it, or to get any one else to do so. Do you think you can come down Tuesday? In the afternoon, if you like, in case you may not be out late,—Yours most truly,

R. LESTER."

Agnes read the letter through once, and put it down on the cover-lid to give herself a little hug of delight. Then she took it up and read it again, seeing each word through blue glasses, interpreting a different meaning to every sentence. How joyful it was. Tuesday—that was the day she meant to be well again—and he said Tuesday also. There must be a kind of fate about the day. Of course she would be dignified, cross with him, vilify Griffiths as he deserved to be vilified, tell Lester that he had been cruel to send her on such an errand, that she didn't believe any more that he had a following—at this notion she gave the note an impulsive kiss of apology —Ah! she would see him again, touch his hand, hear his voice, that was what was best. She would not formulate any moods or speeches for their meeting. They would come when she saw him. She would simply count the hours and get well quickly and think of nothing else but him—him—all the day long.

"I will come on Tuesday," she wrote in pencil, "at four." And after Emily with some dignity had carried off this answer, she fell quietly asleep, the grey envelope and its contents held in her clenched fist, and thrust far under the pillow.

When, later, picking her steps on the stair-case, and leaning on the banisters, she came to the study, her father greeted her with no surprise. He never asked her again how she felt; the appeal of the moment had given place to his usual outward cold-

ness. This she made no attempt to alter, for her phase of irresolution, she reflected, had been as transitory as his. To probe beneath the surface of things, to search for motives, had hitherto appeared to her an unnecessary torment. Since the evening in Oldfield she had developed a spirit of analysis, but she had no intention of applying it to her father's motives or ways. When he talked, she answered in monosyllables or simply yawned, and only the smart of an uneasy conscience changed her indifference now and then into petulance.

The days passed, and on Tuesday morning she forced herself, in the excitement of her mental fancies, to overlook her uncomfortable physical pains. Still, as she sat with a novel on her knee in a low chair by the fire, she could not shake off the depression bred of weakness.

The sound of the boys' voices in school got on her nerves. The incomprehensible skeleton of the sentences they droned out, mingled themselves in endless repetition with the words in her novel; she turned the pages captiously, without comprehending their meaning.

She threw down the book at last impatiently, and, standing in front of the glass above the mantelpiece, examined pensively her even white teeth.

"I don't look pretty to-day," she said, "I don't look even nice; does he care what I look like? Does Robert Lester ever notice anything about me?" Then into the glass came the reflection of an opening door and she saw Philip Assheton watching her in hesitation.

His appearance offered a question for debate. Should she speak to him? For days previous to her expedition she had ignored him. He certainly deserved neither recognition nor speech, but she felt herself too feeble for argument, felt also desperately in need of conversation and companion-

ship. This need conquered. Smiling at his image in the glass, she astonished herself by addressing him with a "good morning" of perfect friendliness.

Philip came forward gladly.

"I'm so pleased you're better—most awfully pleased."

"I hope you said prayers for me, that I might rise from my bed healthy, wealthy and wise."

"Yes, I said prayers for you," he answered gravely.

"Do you know," she went on, sinking languidly into the chair again, "it's tremendously amusing. Father thinks Nicholas was trying to convert me, that we had both escaped to a goody-goody meeting together. Such nice old evangelical ladies brought me home. He was awfully rude to them."

"Ah!" Assheton paused. "You weren't with Nicholas, were you?"

"Yes, at the end. We met in the street. I wanted to get somewhere where I could sit down and be warm, so he, if you please, dragged me into his meeting-house, with what result you know. Grue! What a night it was."

"You don't seem to have enjoyed yourself. Why did you go to Oldfield at all."

Agnes put her head on one side. She looked at Philip interrogatively.

"Would you like to know what I really was doing?"

"If you choose to tell me."

"You won't approve."

He stood by the cupboard drumming a tattoo on the back of the books.

"Probably not," he said.

"Well, to tell the truth," she continued, woman-like, as eager to satisfy his curiosity as to excite it, "I went to interview one of our leaders; I went for Mr Lester. Now try and look interested—and I found him, how do you think?"

"Out? Asleep? Mad? I can't imagine."

"Drunk," said the girl in a sepulchral voice. "It's as bad as if he'd been mad anyway."

Philip knitted his brow.

"I'm not at all surprised," said he.

"Now, don't say that—it's unkind of you. Fancy Mr Lester being drunk. It was just one of those cruel accidents, but it frightened me horribly. I think I'm a little frightened still. Things are so perplexing."

She had not meant to draw Assheton into her confidence, but it was such a relief to talk. A light dawned on his face. He left the books and came and stood on the hearth-rug.

"You know," she went on, looking at him, "when I say my prayers—I do say my prayers sometimes, though you won't believe it—the first thing I ever pray is that I may never see a mad person or a dead one. My drunken friend was quite as terrible."

"Of course," said Assheton slowly, "I understand your feelings in the matter perfectly, but you've got your life to live like other people, and there are more profitable things to pray for."

"What are the sort of prayers you'd like me to pray? 'Please God make me good and gentle, and kind, and unselfish, and obedient, and—'"

"Straightforward?" suggested Philip, smiling at her.

"And straightforward," repeated Agnes, reddening. "No, thank you. Those are not things to be bothered about. Those are the sort of prayers you can pray for me. I ask to be happy."

"And you are happy?"

"Must we begin the whole subject again?" she replied flippantly. "I've come to the conclusion that people are happy in such different ways. There were some women in a public-house and a lot of

drunken men, the women sat on the men's knees, and they all looked supremely happy. That was queer, wasn't it?"

"More than queer," said Philip, glancing down at her in sudden tenderness—"hatefully true to life. So you're making some new windows in your fortifications?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Am I? You can't imagine I want to see any of these horrid things from choice?"

She looked at him enquiringly, almost as if she were asking his advice. Philip's heart beat quickly as he perceived this unexpected confidence.

"May I stop here a little and talk?" he asked humbly. "Work's over."

She hesitated—then in acquiescence moved her feet from the fender stool, and he sat down on it. His eyes rested on her delicate clear-cut face framed by the scarlet cushions of the chair. Her whole figure was in a tired and listless attitude, and close to his hand one foot peeped out from under her serge skirt. He had never been so near to her. He longed to gather her into his arms, she looked so fragile, so dependent. Yet he hardly dared to speak. He could only watch the flickering expressions on her face, as she gazed past him into the fire, and count in a sort of fearful ecstasy the soft breaths that came through her parted lips, or the restless movements of her fingers twined together in her lap.

To be with her in such peace was good. He felt as if a perfect soul-union suddenly enveloped them both. A great hope awoke in his heart, mingled with fresh apprehension.

"You're not very amusing," she said at last, with a coquettish flash of her eyes under the long lashes. "Have you nothing to say? I've been so dull."

His voice was a little husky as he answered her. He chose his words carefully as if afraid of the sound

of them. She guessed his embarrassment and was in a mood to enjoy it.

"What can I say when I'm near you like this, except that I'm content."

"Oh, come, Mr Assheton, you mustn't tell stories. I know you're only really contented when you're arguing."

He flushed to the roots of his hair.

"If you hated argument as much as I do," he began, and then checked himself.

"Don't stop what you were going to say, please. If you hadn't me to argue with how insupportable your existence would be, wasn't that it?" and Agnes laughed mockingly.

'That's cruel of you," he said. "I'd give all the world to agree with you in everything."

"Then why not begin from to-day?"

"How can I?" cried Philip, throwing his arm impulsively across her knee, "How can I, when I love you so absolutely, and yet see you in every action of your life do that which makes me miserable—when you run such terrible risks."

She slipped her chair back quickly, so that his arm fell from her to his side, but she kept her gaze fixed on his.

"What is anything worth without risks?" she said exultingly. "Risk is the tonic of life. I know that you'd love me to be good, that you'd like me to be everything that's conventional, but you might as well expect a—a—to find gold in this coal dust";—she kicked the scuttle with the tip of her shoe—"see how I recognise your ideal and how humble I am. I don't risk anything alone; Robert Lester and I are facing peril for the sake of our cause hand in hand."

She knew that her words hurt him.

Philip changed colour.

"Aren't those empty phrases?" he said coldly. "Why does Lester give you unpleasant messages?

Why does he send you on errands to his drunken satellites? Did you go hand in hand to Oldfield?"

Agnes drew herself up and answered quickly, dreading, well deserved as it was, the personal blame to Lester.

"Hush! please, I don't want to talk about that. It was stupid of me to mention it. I insisted upon doing those things, and they are passed and forgotten."

"Let everything be passed and forgotten as far as he is concerned," cried Assheton desperately, leaning towards her and seizing her hands. "Don't you know that it's all play-acting, that you're drifting in a torrent of make-believes to a dead sea? Oh, what is it that blinds you, why can't you guess the truth?"

She freed her hands from his grasp and stood up, leaning against the table.

"What nonsense," she cried petulantly, "these sort of tragic similes are absurd—I hate exaggeration."

"Exaggeration!" cried Philip, rising also, "only your ignorance talks of exaggeration. It's impossible to overrate the seriousness of the situation."

Agnes laughed—a hard forced little laugh.

"You're not a bit entertaining when you make love," she said. "I wonder if there's any hour in the day when you know how to enjoy things properly. You used at least to be interesting—now you're nothing but a misanthrope."

She had gone too far. Philip's jealousy that he strove so hard to control, blazed forth.

"It's well enough," he cried, "to make fun of my earnestness and my love. Presently, God knows, it will be all that is left to you. The only thing that still can be proved real in the chaos where you will find yourself—when you know Lester as the scoundrel that he is."

He spoke his menace at random. He hardly judged its meaning, half choked as he was with dis-

appointment and fresh despair. The whole position was so cruel, so tantalising.

But Agnes heard his threat with a great anger.

"Robert Lester," she exclaimed, "how dare you mention his name in such a way, how dare you try to rob him of his honour, and my faith—believe me, for that alone—if you were the only man in the world, and I the only woman, I should hate you—hate you—always."

Her swimming eyes flashed back to his in stormy wrath the renewed challenge of perpetual war. Her breath came in short, broken sobs of rage. Philip, trembling in every limb, his head in a whirl, held her arm for a moment in his strong grip; under his pent brow his kindling grey eyes looked straight into hers.

"Hate me," he cried hoarsely, "hate me—till you love me!"

Then he turned from her and strode from the room.

CHAPTER XII

ROBERT LESTER MEETS JOHN STANIER

IN spite of a morning so tumultuous, Agnes, as she sat in Lester's study in the afternoon, was in a self-satisfied frame of mind.

Assheton's threats and anger had put her on her mettle. Her pride had been roused, she had come to her appointment full of defiance, feeling that she must have her due, without yielding Lester either a tender heart or a too humble spirit.

He, on the other hand, had been waiting for her with unusual courtesy. In unaccustomed fashion he had laid a small tea-table and drawn the arm-chair to a comfortable angle near the fire. He knew that he had been lacking in something towards the girl, and was thoroughly conscious of how slight his concern had been regarding the progress of her illness. It had inconvenienced him in a measure, but he had been absent nearly ten days from Stoneyard, snatching at a respite from his exhortations to the strikers, at any excuse for leaving a large batch of letters unanswered. Into the bargain he was glad of a check to their growing intimacy. Every gap between the interviews meant a beginning again, and time was passing so quickly that the opportunity for what he dreaded would be past.

His present somewhat conscience-stricken attentions had, however, met with small acknowledgment; they had been talking at cross purposes for some time.

"I must confess, Miss Stanier," he said, "that

you're a little hard on me. I am sure you've something on your mind; I wish you'd tell me what it is."

He was struggling with the wick of the Etna; the making of tea was not for him a daily matter. Looking irresolutely at the japanned tin canister, he plunged a spoon into its contents.

"How much must I put into the tea-pot?" he went on. "This infernal kettle won't boil."

On these points Agnes volunteered no information, and swept over the plates of bread and butter a glance of perversity.

"It's awfully good of you to take so much trouble for me, but I assure you I don't want tea. I had beef juice and medicine just before I came out."

"Oh, very well," he answered, laughing. "If they satisfied you there is nothing more to be said." He took his cigar case from his pocket.

She made a moue of disapprobation. "You're not really going to smoke?" she asked.

"Not if you don't wish it,"—he held the case half-opened, looking up in astonishment,—"but I am certain, the last time you were here, you told me that there was nothing in the world you loved like cigar smoke."

The girl's face was a study of conflicting emotions; she was playing a difficult part with Lester, this striving to make herself by reserve and capriciousness interesting in his eyes. It was almost impossible in his presence to combat his fascination, and in reality she felt nothing but gladness at being near him again; she checked the flow of words that would have told him so, as they had so often told him, believing that thus he would never appreciate what she had suffered that memorable night on his account. He would set her to the type-writer again, and dwell lightly on the whole event at Oldfield. She longed to make him, in one way or another, regard her as of

importance, to draw him, even by a genuine apology, closer to herself.

"Yes, I don't mind the smoke sometimes," she said. "I suppose I ought to get used to a perfect walking chimney like you, but to-day I don't feel as if I were used to anything—my head aches."

"I'm sorry. Perhaps you'd rather not type-write. Wilson said he could do—"

"Of course I can type-write," she broke in hurriedly, alarmed at the prospect of Wilson's usefulness.

"Well then?"

"Well?"

"How long are we going on like this? Has anything happened? Are you tired of your occupation? You've only to say the word, you know."

"I am expecting you to say the word," she replied, balancing a teaspoon on the end of her finger. "I'm waiting for your enquiries about my visit to Oldfield."

"That's just what I've been trying to ask you, but you have showered me with monosyllables ever since you came into the room; it was enough to paralyse any questioning." He was apparently sufficiently interested to be annoyed. She had a foretaste of possible triumph.

"I found your friend." She paused with sarcastic inflection on the last word.

"Yes?"

"He sent no message by me."

"And the extraordinary part is, he has not written."

"Not extraordinary at all. I hope he would be too ashamed to write. I found him drunk."

Lester gave a long-drawn whistle. "Oh, that's it, is it. Come now," he went on, "you have had a week and more to bottle up a deadly vengeance against me, but I want you to believe that I'm very

little to blame. 'Pon my word, I thought he had got over that failing long ago; if I had had a notion he would be the worse for liquor, I would never—let me see, Saturday, wasn't it you went? Don't you remember I told you not to choose Saturday."

The girl felt aggrieved, Lester was entirely underrating the odiousness of the occurrence.

"Saturday or no Saturday, it was horrible," she said vehemently. "You can't imagine what it was like for me, to be alone with such a man. He gave himself away dreadfully about his money, and then actually insulted me."

"What did he say about the money?" asked Lester, ignoring the remainder of her description.

"Asked me if I'd brought him any—said he couldn't go on unless he was paid at once—said the socialists didn't want him any more."

"I suppose he'd been on the spree in Birmingham. That's a clever fellow wasted. Why are you so surprised that he wanted money? I don't suppose he gets it very regularly."

"Why," she faltered, "I hadn't an idea men were paid for being socialists. I thought they just spoke and worked for the glory of the thing. He said something about your money."

"What?"

"That you were rich, and that this kept you in favour at headquarters. Oh, I don't think he knew what he was talking about."

"For a drunkard he seems to have been singularly garrulous. I suppose the fact that I'm in easy circumstances will leave me my independence till we alter the law of the land. Money brings its price in freedom and flattery at present, not bad things in their way. Anyway they can't accuse me of being a predatory patriot."

As he spoke, the remembrance of her pecuniary relations with Lester seized the girl with a quick

shame. How impossible it was to play the slave-owner when she was herself the slave!

"Money seems to spoil everything it's mixed up with," she said uneasily. "Mr Lester?"—

"Hulloa."

"I wish you wouldn't pay me for my typewriting. I wish you'd let me work for—for—"

"The glory of the thing," he ventured, "and live on air? my dear Miss Stanier you mustn't take things so seriously. It's quite by chance that I'm able to expound my theories without sending round the hat. Nice behaviour if I didn't give—I know you like big expressions—a fair wage for fair work. What would Mr Stanier say?"

"Father wants me to give up working for you altogether."

"He does, does he?"

"Isn't it ridiculous?"

Lester took his cigar case from his pocket again.

"Look here," he said, "I'm no use at discussion without tobacco. You don't seriously mind my having a smoke, do you? I really must."

She laughed in acquiescence.

"Oh, if you must, you must."

"Your father's a remarkable man," he went on, "I'm not sure he's not right. Look how upset you've been over this one encounter with Griffiths."

"There! I know you don't understand. It's unkind of you," she pouted.

"If I knelt at your feet and humbly begged your gracious pardon—which I will do if you like—it won't stop me from saying that it's nothing, to what you will have to put up with, if you intend to remain in our ranks. There is a dark side to the picture which you insist on painting with your own colours, which even a drunken ranter does not represent. If you take my advice you will respect your father's wishes, and decamp as soon as you can." The girl, as she

listened, held her chin in her hands, and leant her elbows on the tea-table. What perplexity his strangeness aroused; his manner one moment so serious, the next joking or indifferent; she was powerless to convince him of his shortcomings. He treated her complaint much as he had treated her effort and her failure with Assheton — as a matter of course. It would be but a hollow victory if she did force him to his knees in mocking submission; by raising alarms about the cause, by hinting at dark possibilities, he could not, however, elude her. His personality in its overwhelming attraction meant more to her now than all the aspirations and schemes that had bound her at first to his side. She would follow him to the end of the chapter.

"If you're able to work for the regeneration of the world for the mere love of it," she said softly, "you, who are rich, and might be anything you liked, do you think I'm going, because of a few disappointments, to return to my hum-drum life, and desert the whole thing?"

"It's different for you, your life is only just beginning. You have not shut the door on experience as I have."

"Shut the door on experience? How can one do that while one is alive?"

"Quite easily. It's a door that swings to on its hinges, and leaves years and years standing out in the cold."

"How funny you are. I am dying to drop upon my experiences; I long for them to be stirring. I hardly seem to have had any experiences yet at all. I mean any that count."

"Then, pray heaven," he said fervently, "to keep you inexperienced."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. It would be much more sensible if you would tell me all you've gone through, I might profit by the information.

I know really nothing about your life before you came to Stoneyard."

"No, certainly I'm not guilty in any of my most violent dissertations, of teaching or telling you anything. If I imagine you're contenting yourself with one of my theories, I snatch it from you, to give you an entirely contradictory one." He looked at her narrowly. "Now, isn't that the case?"

"You are puzzling sometimes—very," she admitted, "but I think—"

"Don't think at all," he cried, taking one of her hands in his so tightly that she could have screamed. "I won't teach you. You have not got me to blame for any real knowledge that you've acquired. I've introduced you to rogues and drunkards, that's possible—they're part and parcel of our mumming. Tell me, I've laid no other obligation at your door—tell me, I insist."

"No — no — I don't know," she stammered, bewildered by his vehemence.

"Don't know! You came to write for me because you wanted to write for me. You listen to my ravings because you like listening to them. You choose to reflect what you call my enthusiasms because you want to reflect them. There's nothing in all that forced upon you—answer me."

"You frighten me," she said. "It's awful to hear you talk like this; why do you do it?"

"Ah, why?" he said, almost flinging her hand from him, "because I'm a fool—because something struck me—because I was afraid of something."

He moved restlessly about the room, picking up the papers from one table, laying them upon another, heaping up the magazines aimlessly, fingering the typewriter. To Agnes, watching him, there stole back with renewed strength the thought that she had thrust from her, that his rough reserve, his cold manner, were after all but the mask of warmer feelings

—warmer feelings that from his unenviable position in the town, from the recognition of the enmity of all her friends, he feared might be unreciprocated by her, or considered unwarrantable by them. After all he had drawn no other woman into his schemes as he had drawn her. When for a time she left him, it was always his voice that called her back, his voice that said, "I have none but you, to sympathise with my plans and ideas." Clad in the garb of her passionate desire, illumined by her vivid imagination, these feelings at this moment pushed all other facts into the background. There crept through all her being an intoxicating hope, running like fire in her veins.

"What's the matter?" she said, rising and standing in front of Lester. "You tell me I take things seriously—but you—you worry about heaps of things you ought to allow me to help you with. I was angry just now because I was disappointed, because you were not really fussed about Griffiths, perhaps because you would not pity me; you see, I watch you so; but I'm not standing on my dignity any more.

> There was a young girl named A.S.
> Who meaning to curse, stayed to bless.

My poetry is on a par with my penitence. Give me your commands."

In her voice there was a bantering caress of possession. He, buried in fretting fancies, raised his head and looked for a second into her eyes with a dazed expression.

"My commands," he said confusedly. "What good are my commands to you? Of course," he continued with quick relief in his tone, as if he had recovered himself from a dangerous situation, "there's the work, an appalling lot of work. I've got something to tell you too—let me think what it is."

She waited.

"I learned this afternoon; that there's about

another week's pay in the Union funds left, that's all; the other is—as I wrote—that Assheton has done his best to prevent this coming to the master's ears, for he's going to clinch them to an offer of compromise this evening. They've got a sort of "At Home" at the Big House, and he believes he'll get them all together and in a good humour."

"Philip Assheton is a meddler," interposed the girl. "He meddles with my affairs, and yours; he meddles with the masters, and he meddles with the men."

"Well, I tried hard to find out what day they may be likely to meet and discuss this compromise, and they expect it'll be pretty soon. I wish I could secure a little money from somewhere, just to keep the strikers' hearts up. I have no more to spare myself, and it would be a disappointment to be hissed down at positively my last public appearance! We ought to have our meeting soon—Friday, at latest, don't you think so?"

"Friday, and to-day is Tuesday—yes."

"The only real fix I am in, is about the speakers. They want me to pay for some, and I don't see the joke of that. I found out in London that they're sick of this strike at headquarters. They've no sympathy with failures. No one is going to get anything out of this."

"Except Philip's compromise?"

"Oh, I mean our lot, we're altogether independent of the Union—free lances, in fact. We make a blaze and then disappear — shooting stars. Only," he added, in a mock-tragic voice, "there isn't any shooting to be done in England, that's the worst of it."

Agnes, in love with a new conceit, laughed. "Bloodthirsty again," she said; "what do you say to having me as a speaker?"

"You," he said, "you?" The amazement in his face was genuine.

"Yes, I—Agnes Stanier—daughter of an Oxford graduate—aged eighteen—social democrat and advanced woman at your service." She made him a deep obeisance.

Lester was amused. "Come, there's something taking in the notion," he said, entering into her spirit, "but you ought to have had some practice with the Primrose League first."

"Oh, oh," she demurred. "I won't be snubbed; you have no idea how splendidly I'll do it if you'll only let me try."

"Are you really in earnest?"

"Certainly I am."

"I'm afraid you won't find it so easy to make your words come properly in a speech; you're one of those people whose thoughts outrun their tongue—who always finish their sentences before they've begun them. All the same you ought to captivate the vulgar mind if you don't soar too far above it."

"Why should I?"

"On the principle that having never worn tight shoes yourself, you can't tell where the shoe pinches others."

"For the matter of that, you're not starving; you have probably never been starving, and you literally make me cry when you talk to the people who may be starving, so you see—"

"There are two kinds of starvation, I believe," Lester interrupted, but he did not pursue the subject. Agnes, full of her scheme, seemed disinclined for abstract reasoning, and prattled on.

"Now, just let me try," she said eagerly; "I'll get up on that stool—I can't have you towering above me. It will be splendid practice, and I'll imagine you're a hundred men at least."

"What an effort. You'll only tire yourself abominably," he protested. "Much better let me write

down what I think you ought to say; mercifully, on an occasion of this sort, there's nothing like playing on the emotions—I've exhausted all logic long ago."

But she was not to be persuaded. "I won't keep you a minute," she cried; "sit down there," stretching out her arm—"there—now!" She stepped upon the stool, swaying a little as her feet sank into the soft velvet; all her pallor had gone, her eyes danced with excitement, and her young voice rang clearly.

"Comrades," she said, and she flung the words out into the room. Sentence after sentence, irresistible in the charm of voice and manner, hopelessly empty in substance, seemed yet to carry to Lester a certain evidence of power that he had not suspected in her. "If this girl trains on," he thought, "she will be a useful card for the party. It's a pity I left her undiscovered in this capacity so long, that so short a time is left me for her use. This speech, at least, she mustn't miss."

"Bravo! bravo! Mrs Annie Besant and Lady what's-her-name rolled into one. You are awfully clever, Miss Stanier; you'll take all the wind out of Assheton's sails if he attempts to wreck the meeting. Will he be astonished?"

"Astonished!" she cried, still standing on the stool and laughing merrily at him — "He'll be mad. Really I think he and father would like to keep all women behind bars. They mustn't do this and they mustn't do that—it's absurd. I'm simply longing for the meeting."

"It will come quite soon enough. You won't be nervous?"

"Is that likely, when I'm speaking for you. Come here," she added coquettishly, "come and help me down."

Their hands met. Lester looked at her in approba-

tion. How pretty she was, with her curls tumbling about her radiant face, her sparkling eyes, her rosy and demure mouth, the lips in her breathlessness parted a little showing the small white teeth, the colour coming and going in her clear complexion. She lingered intentionally in her attitude, her breath fanned his cheek, and thus it was, without premeditation and without intention, under a passing impulse born of her child-like beauty and of their playful words, he kissed her.

To her it seemed but the fulfilment of all hopes, the climax of all desires, the expression of all unspoken thoughts. Lester was not like other men who might have flirted with empty words, who might have fed her vanity with flattery; he was too great for all that. How had Assheton in his jealousy dared to rob him of his character. The very distance of his manner she remembered only as dignity, his formality as respect. He loved her; most surely he loved her; a kiss must mean so much to such a man. What need now of further control, of continued struggle, of self-tormenting analysis. In utter self-surrender she clung to him.

"Was that why you were afraid? Was that why you did not want to be under an obligation to me?" she whispered. "Ah, I know now—I have wanted to know so long—dear, how I love you."

Almost before the words were uttered he had thrust her so brusquely from him, that had she not caught the corner of the table, she would have fallen. As she stood there, fearful, with beating heart, striving to understand his action, her eyes followed his to the door. It had opened, and John Stanier was crossing the room towards them.

The silence of surprise in its intensity fell upon Lester and the girl. Every sound became a noise; the creak of Stanier's boots upon the carpet, the slip of the coals in the grate, the tapping of the blind cord

against the window. The schoolmaster, his clean-shaven stern countenance, immobile of expression, looked almost cadaverous. As the men stood near each other they appeared much of a height, but Stanier's erect carriage had the advantage over the younger man's high bent shoulders.

"Sir," he said, breaking the silence, "I have an excuse for my intrusion; I have come to fetch my daughter."

There was no trace of embarrassment in his manner, yet the girl watching him in amazement, guessed at the effort he was making, for beads of perspiration stood on his broad forehead.

Lester bowed slightly, wanting time to collect himself, time to recover from the rush of self-condemnation which had followed his rash act. He knew of Stanier by hearsay, the story of his life, his character for reserve and patient hard work as the outcome of the irrevocable failure of a life's ambition, had interested him. He had wished for the day, which Agnes had always evaded, when he might have established by an acquaintanceship, a respect that he offered him even from his reputation. No wish, however, could have been granted in a more inopportune manner. He had an inexplicable desire to stand well in the schoolmaster's eyes, to face him on his own ground. Now, as things were, he cast about even for a word.

"Pray don't make any excuses," he said at last. "Your daughter is here, if you've any matter to settle with her."

Assheton had spoken of this man as a gentleman. John Stanier was glad that he could instantly agree with the conclusion; it made it an easier task than dealing with a blustering cad. He hesitated in his reply.

"It's not my wish that she should continue to be your amanuensis. It will be better, as she is so misled

by your doctrines, if you can assure her that others can fill her place, that, in short, you——"

Lester interrupted him impatiently, "Really, Mr Stanier, I'm quite aware that your daughter has been of great service to me, but I can't possibly undertake to be her mentor. You tell me you wish her to relinquish her employment. I shall be glad, I repeat, if you'll make your own arrangements."

The girl listened attentively to Lester, and felt a chill of disappointment at his diplomacy. After the first moment of surprise, on her father's entry, she believed that his arrival had brought an opportunity pregnant with happiness. Lester loved her. In the light of this fact everything else became to her of secondary consideration. Events were being certainly hustled in their development, but surely he would not lose so providential an occasion, but would throw himself in some way or other into the breach of her father's disapproval, and assure him that their lives were all irretrievably bound together, and that what they now wanted was neither reproof nor criticism, but the "bless you, my children" of an indulgent parent.

Lester, however, was working out her thoughts on totally different lines, and the gulf between them troubled her. She wanted to convey to him the knowledge of how easily John Stanier might be managed, and ventured on the familiarity of a grimace behind her father's back. But Lester returned her a blank look—she raised no responsive smile—no silent communication.

"I'm really sorry, Mr Stanier," he went on gravely, following up his advantage, as the schoolmaster remained silent, "that I should have asked your daughter to do anything against your will. I'd an idea that you wanted her to practise type-writing, so at least she told me. Of course my affairs in Stoneyard gave her an excellent opportunity."

The machine stood on a distant table. By the tidiness of the heaped-up letters and papers around, it was apparent that for some time it had been undisturbed. John Stanier noted its position before answering.

"Type-writing is the ostensible reason for which she comes here, but a different agency is at work to imbue her with the absurd notions and unpractical conduct which she displays. To-day, for instance, she positively insisted on coming out when she is recovering from a severe chill, and the doctor forbade her to leave the house."

Lester bit his moustache to repress a smile. He was prepared for a torrent of invectives on Socialism in general. He had hoped to draw Stanier into the heat of a political argument—the fighting instincts in his nature rejoiced in a worthy antagonist—but the hope faded. The way the schoolmaster was engrossed in the girl's physical and moral aches and pains, was tiresome and ludicrous.

"I quite agree," he said, with polite sarcasm, "that your daughter should be careful——" but Agnes, checking his remark, had sprung forward.

"I agree to nothing," she cried indignantly. "I am furious at being treated as a child—at being solemnly talked over in this way. It's a perfect shame. You've known of my employment, father, for months, and until last week you've never spoken a word of disapproval. I told you then I wouldn't give it up."

Stanier answered her. "It's a shame to me, Agnes, that I've not sooner awakened to the fact that I must save you from yourself. Whatever the estrangement between us, it's my duty to act as I'm doing—duty—ah, it's more than my duty—and it costs me more."

He spoke as if he were delivering a mandate. Lester, his head thrown back, studied the father and

daughter between his half-closed lids. At times, a quaint resemblance between them accentuated the contrast of other moments.

"You have heard my wishes," continued the schoolmaster, sternly. "Are you coming?"

She was by his side — quivering — passionate — seizing his coat-sleeve——

"Wait—wait. I'm not coming. I've more to say. Mr Lester," she appealed, "tell my father that what he asks is impossible—that I must work for you in any way, in every way you like—that I won't give up anything—that I won't be coerced into his narrow views—that I won't be dictated to—tell him that I'm going to speak for you—you've a right to tell him." She was breathless—almost hysterical in her insistence. Lester felt his self-contempt for his own passing weakness react unreasonably upon his consideration for the girl. It made him intolerant of her heroics; he feared they might culminate in a disclosure of his foolishness. In his endeavour to curb her excitement, he put as he replied the coldest indifference into his voice and words:—

"Why appeal to me," he said, "your father considers your occupation perilous for you, and my influence unwholesome. Your father must always be right, Miss Stanier—any way, I've no business to come between you and his wishes."

In her wide eyes dismay and surprise were mingled. What motive had he in this exaggerated suavity—in these polished sentences?

Still talking, Lester had turned to the schoolmaster.

"Perhaps you didn't follow your daughter's meaning," he said. "She alludes to an engagement, at a mass meeting we hope to have for the men on strike. She has promised to give an address—in that, you see, she still feels bound to me."

"Speak," repeated Stanier slowly, as if he had not heard aright, "speak—my daughter—on a platform?"

"Oh, women speak so well nowadays," suggested Lester soothingly. "I don't think you need disapprove this once, the strike——" He stopped, astonished by the passionate misery that had crept into Stanier's cold, deep-set eyes.

"Approve—disapprove," he burst forth, passing his hand backwards and forwards across his brow as if to chase the odious thought. "Ah, there are some things which you cannot understand. How can you? —you—whose business is to destroy the family—to cast our hallowed affections, our most holy memories in the dust."

Lester's lip curled at this censure, but the note in Stanier's voice changed suddenly to entreaty.

"When the sun of happiness since youth has been behind a cloud, can't you conceive that one treasures the little that is left in so unspeakable a manner that a sort of dumb madness ensues, a feeling inexpressible in its intensity, and consequently futile—utterly futile. That has been the case with me—my idolatry for my children has bred not happiness but increased suffering. When my wife died, when I knew that advancement and ambition were sealed books to me, I clung only to one thing that death in life had left me for a future, my hope in my children. My boy is over the sea—where, I don't know; he hasn't written for a year. My girl is here—but she might be there also, for she cannot understand me. You found me unprepared for your announcement, and you've drawn all my weakness from me."

His voice quavered with intensity of feeling, like the voice of a very old man. In those few minutes his erect carriage had gone—he appeared to have shrunk pitiably. Torn asunder at last were the iron bands of control, that had repressed all emotion. Set loose now, on the impulse of a moment, the pent-up feelings of years, poured forth the stronger, for the restraint. Contemptuous of his own weak-

ness, but powerless to conquer it, humiliated, mentally prostrate before the fresh sorrow that threatened him, Stanier, in this stranger's study, went on talking as if nothing else mattered but the joyousness of deliverance.

"Years and years only," he went on feverishly, "have disciplined me—to gain such discipline over one's own nature, over the hopes and longings that belong to it, means the walking in a narrow path in constant self-restraint. I refused to look to right or to left of me, refused to modify the plan of my life; and to my notion of womanhood, I chained the fancy of my daughter, never believing that she could be other than I wished.

"The day came when she returned to me, brighter, more comely than I had hoped—on such a score my love could have no gainsaying—but within twelve hours I knew that in temperament, in education, in inclination, she was other than the girl of whom I dreamt. My fears began to take form, and I erred fatally. I met her enthusiasms with remonstrances; her giddy assertions with contention, I steeled myself against following her in any direction, till finding at last that all influence would be useless, all argument thrown away, I kept silence. But what torture that silence has been. To see her day by day drifting irresponsibly from my side — spending herself where I would have her save—giving out nothing to me, as I hungered beside her for her affection. I began to believe at last that I was sinking into an indifference which in time would deaden all my pain, but recent events have shown me how false that idea was. To-day I have to speak. I feel as if I were making a last struggle to rescue her life and mine from the blight of unalterable misunderstanding, which when one loves, is worse than death itself. Mr Lester, don't rob me of her, to serve your schemes; I need her so."

Too astonished to move, the girl crouched beside her father, where, during his expostulations, she had stood. Lester, nervous and irritated, fell into his accustomed habit, and began to pace the room.

What sympathy had he with such an exaggerated grievance? Morbid suffering indeed must exist to break down the habitual reserve and change the schoolmaster from the cold stoic to the trembling weakling. A train of memories launched Lester into an ocean of self-pity and revolt. This man suffered, but how dare he lay bare his festering wounds, unwitting of the tortured souls that might be beside him. It was crass selfishness and effeminacy. He loved his daughter undoubtedly, but that was no excuse at all—love held all the nominations for the school of misfortune. A veritable rage, born of conflicting sensations, flared up in Lester and threw him into his ugliest mood. Stanier had cast himself on his mercy—he should have nothing but his contempt. At all costs he must stop further disclosures, choke all fresh confidences. His voice, callous and unnatural, froze any utterances that the schoolmaster had still in mind.

"The story of your experiences, sir, seems out of place. It's a little hard that you should choose my busiest hour and my private room for a scene. Your daughter, of course, agrees with me that she prefers obedience to your wishes to domestic broils. I'm right, Miss Stanier, am I not?" The authority with which he spoke gave her no opening for denial. "Typewriting can be done by others—so can speeches. I am leaving Stoneyard so soon, there's no need to distress yourself. Your courage, Mr Stanier, suited you better than your confessions."

He knew that his scathing words went home. At the moment he was glad that the schoolmaster writhed under them. No one realised his failure more than Stanier himself. He had staked all the

self-imposed formulas of his life, all his convictions in this throw—and for what?—not for the gain of his child; she, sullen and distressed, refused to take the hand he held out to her, looking at him with lowering brow. For one sign from Robert Lester—it was for that she waited. He never glanced at her, walking swiftly across the room to open the door and let them go quickly. Not a word—not a gesture that she could interpret familiarly. In her disappointment the shadows round her eyes darkened, and she bit her lip piteously to keep back the rising tears.

In passing, Stanier lingered.

"Is there anything more you wish to say to me?" Lester asked impatiently.

"No, sir," said the schoolmaster, looking him full in the face, with a rush of his old pride. "No, God willing—neither to-day nor in the future," and he went out with erect head.

Yearning for an explanation, the girl with lagging steps followed her father. The passage was narrow and Lester was near her. Her heart leapt.

"Isn't this scene hateful," she said to him hurriedly. "What time can I come to-morrow?—you haven't made things easy for me, but, you know, of course I shall speak all the same."

"Shall you?" he said, with a vague smile and she received no further encouragement. The housekeeper took over the honours of their departure; Lester retreated into his study and closed the door.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHADOWS THICKEN

LESTER stood for a moment counting the fall of their footsteps on the pavement. When they had passed out of ear-shot, he pulled down the blind with a smothered exclamation, as if, in a kind of fury, he wanted to hide all things of himself that might have been disclosed, as if the very light of heaven were intrusive.

That he should recognise instantly the unreasonableness of this feeling was inevitable; his commonsense reasserted itself, and with a snap the blind flew up again. Thoroughly disorganised, he paced the room, stepping across the rays of the setting sun that streaked the sombre carpet, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his face pale and set. "Is it impossible," he said to himself, "to keep one's life in one's own hands? Must every stranger peep and pry into that which concerns him not, and am I by my fatuous actions to unlock in his face the very gates that I would keep closed?"

From the first moment of his acquaintanceship with Agnes Stanier, Lester had discovered the narrowness of her views, her ignorance of all the wider issues of life. For the purpose they had in hand it was better thus. Once having gained her allegiance, she fell to his work with greater celerity, greater submission.

But on the other hand her very simplicity and sentimentality had wrought the mischief. For weeks past he had felt uneasy as to whither matters were

tending, and now the climax had come. She had taken his light act in all seriousness, and placed him in a ridiculously false position. Lester felt her clinging kiss still warm upon his lips, and rebelled at the very recollection. He had yielded under her encouragement to a fool's impulse, but she was nothing to him. "Good God," he thought, "what could she be in her childish prettiness and irresponsibility?" Yet her kiss had been, not the kiss of a child but of a woman, and it brought him remembrance. Then the heart-broken father, absurd, puerile in his pleading, had re-stirred to quivering pain buried incidents of the past, accentuating this remembrance a thousand-fold. What did he wish to remember?—Nothing — nothing. He defied the future in a present, that cursed by failure, asked no reflection, but resolved itself into a mere ranting struggle after notoriety.

The veins stood out on his forehead, and he clenched his teeth, as, throwing himself down on the sofa, he wrestled with despondent thoughts. To distract himself, he took up book after book and dug the paper-knife between uncut leaves, but no passive occupation could bring relief. He tossed the volumes from him. "Come," he said out loud, as if adjuring some spirit hovering near, "my life is my own, and I'll live it—by gad, I will—as I wish." Then with a shake of his heavy shoulders as if re-adjusting something that had slipped from him, he shut down his escritoire, locked it and went out into the street.

He walked on fast through the town until the streets lost themselves in country lanes; the fresh still air, and, as the twilight fell, the twittering of undisturbed birds in the hedges, gave him a sense of loneliness and safety. It was a calm evening, dark clouds hung heavily on the horizon, but the sun had set in a flare of gold, and had lighted each

western window of the town with a promise for the morrow. Lester strode on down the hill, walking with quick steps through the shadow of a copse of fir trees, and loitering when he gained the open country again.

He stopped at a wooden gate and looked across a rough field in which sheep were browsing, to where beyond, the water meadows lay shrouded in mist. From the gloom the dark stems of the willow trees stood out, like benighted travellers in a swamp. A cock pheasant rose through the hedge and flew over him with its guttural cry. With whimsical instinct Lester raised his stick to his shoulder and pointed it as a gun at the bird, dropping it again as suddenly with a laugh of self-ridicule. He was conscious at the moment of a strong desire to throw his present reckless existence to the winds, and return to a former state, when as Robert Lester, land-owner and sportsman, he had fostered all the systems he now decried. And yet what little store in that time had he set by his easy enjoyments. His nature had always been one that valued essentials only, turning contemptuously from the mere trappings of existence. Through those years there was only one thing that meant anything to him — one thing — God! that one thing: his frame trembled with the intense agony of the recollection.

To turn back to that pain as he would have to turn, if his strength failed him now, was beyond consideration. He clung with satisfaction to the only relief possible—that deadly power, that brutality of the egoist, which through the virulence of its own suffering draws others in self-defence under the same ban. The light-hearted happiness of fortunate men goaded Lester to madness. He could only be a partisan of those, who, the sport of fate, lived, tainted by the leprosy of misfortune, and called it ill-luck. With

such he had something in common, something to fight for. To attach himself to a party which gave him liberty, and with the watch-word of destruction, to wage war against the existing order of things, interested him. He had cut himself adrift from old associations and old acquaintances, full of supreme hope that this new profession would satisfy him. But in spite of all efforts and intentions, the life had not been an unmixed success. Courageous and determined himself, he found his fellow-workers cautious and undecided; he attracted crowds by his words, but when it came to action he stood alone. Every victory was counterbalanced by a defeat. Yet no political reverse, no public scorning, had been more galling to his vanity than his own weakness in regard to Agnes, and during the interview with her father. Throughout the whole scene he felt that he had been led into a false part; he was conscious of a petty cruelty and stupidity in his attitude towards John Stanier, and knew that his eternal condemnation by the schoolmaster could be the only consequence.

To stand now, however, regretting, was mere folly. He would have given much to have been able to leave the place this night, to shake off the dust of his shoes against it for ever. There were still a few more cards to play—not trumps, he knew full well—but for the sake of his reputation he must see the game out, take his beating with dignity, and go—yes, thank heaven! go.

Wrapped in these meditations, he leant against the gate, his elbows lifted on to the top bar, and his hat tilted over his eyes. A brake rolled by full of men returning from hunting. He watched the yellow wheels revolving through the dust, the peep of scarlet under the heavy ulsters and the scratched and battered hats of sportsmen, who filled the air with their chatter and their cigarette smoke. It was

a queer coincidence that this scene from a familiar past should mock him at this moment. Someone tossed out a fusee as they drove by, and it fizzed for a time at Lester's feet. When it had gone out he stooped, and picked it up with a laugh, and threw it over the hedge. "So much for my foolery," he said, as he walked back with resolution into the town, striding up the High Street again, through the market place, and past the booths; the lingering buyers, more necessitous in their wants than in the autumn, and more hesitating in their fulfilment.

As he reached the corner near his house, his steps from the curb-stone into the road were arrested, and in spite of himself he uncovered. The small and straggling procession of a child's funeral passed slowly in the twilight towards the churchyard. He stood looking after it, his eyes contracted, seeing through a film the moving coal-black figures, the patches of white in the wreath of violets on the pall, and the thin, sad faces of the mourners.

"'Tis Challinor's girl. Th' little lad were put i' th' ground last wick. They seyn there's fayver or summat dain there. Trampin's better nor strikin' i' this bloomin' place."

Lester turned and faced the speaker at his elbow, a tramp, stockingless, his boots down at heel and his clothes in ragged holes. As he spoke the man slouched backward through the pot-house door, and Lester caught it on the swing.

He followed inside. There was nothing better to do. The trend of the thoughts within him would keep their course better in the company of these idlers. He would be in that element where claptrap had its use, and words swayed like deeds, where in the movement of applause or tipsy disapproval, he would obtain ease and pluck again.

He leant back against the counter and lit his pipe. It was an unprofitable tavern, and the place was dingy and ill-kept, the sandy floor fouled by muddy boots and much expectoration.

In the corner, under an oleograph, hanging on the white-washed wall, of Queen Victoria in her Jubilee bonnet, a man slept. A mongrel terrier curled at his feet. Two other men leant across the bar, talking in low voices, and sucking their clay pipes meditatively. The tramp, fingering his ragged pockets for a coin, stood in the middle of the place and looked sheepishly at Lester.

"Two pints of beer," said the latter boldly, divining the man's desire, and tossing the price to the landlord, who shuffled about among his barrels in carpet slippers.

"Not much spirit here, mate," he added with a laugh, drawing the man into his confidence for the sake of beginning a discussion, and sending his glance from one sullen drinker to another.

The tramp, appreciating the joke and his treat, ran his tongue round his cheek and guffawed.

"It's aw' death an' glory' i' this 'ere place sin' Michaelmas—Oi've tramped it twoice to Manchester and back agen, and things are wusser nor they were afore."

His guest was intelligent. Lester was glad of so good a foil for his gallery speeches.

"I'm not surprised that you'd rather be a walker than a worker any day on such terms," he said, raising his voice. "These men deserve to die; the only glorification they're likely to get is from the parson in the church-yard."

At this remark there was a scraping of feet on the floor, a listless movement of interest from the men with the clay pipes.

Lester went on, still apparently addressing the tramp, whose nose was buried in a pewter mug.

"You wouldn't believe, would you, that I'd toiled and moiled at all to keep these strikers up to the mark? When I came here they bragged a lot about their Union and their leaders, but they're a craven-hearted lot when it comes to the test. A pot can't boil without a fire—a fire, did I say?—these Stoneyard men haven't the fizz of a damp match; what a farce it all is, eh, mate?"

The tramp put down the mug. He scented mischief and kept silent.

"They had'st best kape civil tongue i' thy yed abart Stoneyard men," growled a voice in the corner.

The skirmish was beginning. A light crept into Lester's eyes. He had forgotten all but the part he had to play.

"For what reason?" he said coolly, turning to the speaker. "What's the distinction about a Stoneyard man? The masters certainly are mighty—the workers grovel to them and think themselves lucky. There's been no grovelling done these last few months—I've made certain of that—but what did the poor slaves do? Did they rise up, and shout and fight like men, and compel the country to notice their wrongs? Ye gods, no—they whine and snivel in their leader's face, and curse him behind his back. There's not a hay-stack been lit on the country-side—not a ten minutes' riot in the market-place. A couple of men fought for a principle, and the crowd jeered. They scour the country-side and pick up coppers to get drunk on. Any fool can do that, but for the rest they're cowards, useless cowards."

Lester knocked the ashes out of his pipe and folded his arms, his face ablaze. The landlord looked over the taps, with alarm painted on his face. Such sedition on his peaceful premises savoured of Guy Fawkes. He began to have qualms about his cellar.

"Coward yersen," growled the same voice, taking up Lester's word. "Yew've bread an' brass fer th' askin', and a darned soight yew keer fer th' rest on us—bread fer th' childer and paice fer the woman, that's wat'n woy want, scrattlin' women and sick babbies maks a 'ell fer ony mon. Th' Union isna dooin' us no good. Oi'd work fer a copper a day ter try an' bey getten out'n of this business."

"There's gratitude for you," gibed Lester. "You'll be at the vicar's Christmas party, my friend, right enough—plum pudding, and flannel waistcoat, and a brand-new text. Save your soul by all means—what does a penny a day more or less matter?"

As he spoke the door swung open again and a man rolled in—a little unsteady of gait. He held a greasy note-book in one hand, a handful of coppers in the other. He went up to the bar, calling loudly for a jug of ale, then suddenly turned and recognised Lester. With an involuntary gesture that savoured of a guilty conscience, his hand covered the money he had just pushed forward.

Lester laughed cynically. "Oh, don't mind me, man, take your drink. I'll not betray you to the treasurer." The other stood mute and undecided, scratching his head. Taken aback by Lester's observation and unexpected permission, he was half ashamed into the bargain.

Lester turned from him whistling, and walked to the window. It was impossible, he felt, to rouse these men to any sense of wrong or of shame; save in the province of their narrow lives, they had no outlook, no ardour. The few around him were the riff-raff of the ranks. With the others it was worse, for they knew more and their decision was of more importance. He stood staring into the dusk, feeling the old re-action,—the hatred of his occupation—stealing over him.

One by one the followers of the funeral came

dawdling down the street. A tall respectably dressed young fellow entered the public-house. In the gloom he ran against Lester. Then as the light burst suddenly from the gas jet in the ceiling they hailed each other.

"Ah, Johnson!"

"Good evening, Mr Lester," said Johnson, evasively, and made to go out again.

"Don't go—wait a minute—I want to ask you something. Why did you men give such a very poor account of the strike to that newspaper reporter who was down the other day? You missed a great chance. The man was prepared to do a good deal for us. He was disappointed, he told me. Said I was wasting my time — that you were willing to accept any compromise. In fact that it was probable you might go in on the old terms, and give the masters a smashing victory. You never intimated anything of this to me before."

"Needs must when the devil drives," said Johnson bitterly. "You're not bringing us any more funds, and the men are actually pinning their faith on Mr Assheton's compromise. He thinks it's likely, and we're lying low. It would not help our case if we'd spouted to the newspapers."

"At least you might have told the man the truth about the state of things in the trade," objected Lester.

"There's been so much tommy-rot talked, that's the fact. Mr Assheton's bringing some sense in now. Not that we don't think you've done your best, sir, but there have been mistakes all round." Then, as if apprehensive of his own candour, and Lester's cross-questioning, Johnson turned and went quickly into the street.

Lester ground his teeth. He had known the hopelessness of the game from the beginning, and in that very knowledge had courted defeat — now in con-

trariness he desired that it should be utter, crushing, brimful of suffering for those obstinate workers. For, if he had failed to lead them, why should he yield the palm to Assheton. It was an odious thought—that he of all men should steal the victory and save them from the worst. He saw his power had slipped away, he saw that in the novelty of his personality and words had rested his chief hold. Now they knew him and all he said, by heart, at least so they thought, and were ready to turn against him at any moment. Some of them feared him—all misunderstood him; a few would follow him to the end; not one should discover, however, that he thought more of this failure than of a passing incident in the day's work. He had come amongst them as a stranger, he would go from amongst them a stranger still. Philip Assheton should never quell his suspicions by certainty. "The king is dead," he said to himself, "dead as mutton, but by the powers, no post-mortem!"

Whilst he and Johnson had been talking, the bar of the public-house had grown fuller. Men moved in and out rapidly, carrying from the benches their foaming pewter mugs. Over-head the bright gas jets dispelled the gloom. Many eyes were turned towards Lester searchingly.

He walked nearer to the door. His friend the tramp had fallen asleep in the corner, and he had no wish to be drawn into personal wrangling with his own followers. After all, his study was the safest refuge.

At that moment a little child, with a can in its arms half as big as itself, brushed against his knee, and looked up into his face. Something in the expression startled him; he bent towards the little thing. Her great dark eyes searched his with a look at once appealing and puzzled. Under the lank, black hair the cheeks shone white as snow, the small blue lips moved pitifully.

With a sudden impulse of familiarity which he did

not stop to analyse, Lester lifted her above the crush that hemmed her in.

"What do you want?" he said.

"Beer—beer for fader. Ise lost me penny," and she began to cry—fretfully—monotonously—clinging to Lester. He held her closely, listening all the time to the sound of her crying as if to a well-known tune.

"Hush!" he said, "don't cry—don't cry."

"I'se lost my penny," she repeated. "Fader'll beat me."

"No, no, we'll find another penny, little one; here it is—a penny—and a sugar stick. Keep quiet. Shall I sing to you?"

With his arms protecting her the wailing grew less, the face looked comforted, the tiny head nodded. Without premeditation, almost as if he were acting in a dream, Lester broke into a low crooning melody; as he sang, every line in his face seemed to disappear, and under his dark lids there was a glistening as of tears. Quite softly and distinctly, over her small head, the words fell from him—words he had picked up from a Shropshire poet, and set to his own fancy.

"Where I watch the living meet,
And the moving pageant file,
Warm and breathing through the street,
Where I lodge a little while.
If the heats of hate and lust
In the house of flesh are strong,
Let me mind the house of dust,
Where my sojourn shall be long.

In the nation that is not,
Nothing stands that stood before;
There revenges are forgot,
And the haters hate no more."

He stopped suddenly in an access of recollection, and looked round with dazed eyes. The men near

him had seen him lift the child, and watching his every movement, without catching the sense of the words, had heard the song. Astonishment was painted on every countenance. The child, at the cessation of the tune, buried her head on Lester's shoulder, and went on crying.

"Whose child is this?" he said harshly, trying to put her from him.

There was no answer.

"Whose child is this?" he repeated impatiently, holding her up like a chattel at an auction.

"Seabridge's youngster," said a voice at last. "She 'as fits—she'll 'ave one now if yew dunna gie 'er 'er feyther's beer."

A slight laugh ran through the group, and as if he had been stung, a spasm crossed Lester's face.

For an instant he held the little thing in a tight embrace, her dark hair just touching his moustache. Then he put her down almost roughly.

"Take her out of this," he said, "take her out at once, one of you." He turned commandingly, and the landlord filling the child's can, a man obeyed him.

He had regained importance and interest in the eyes of his former followers. In the silence that followed his strange action they came crowding around expectantly, and in the momentary change of events he threw off his bitterness, and recovered his dignity and cold self-possession.

"A spaych—a spaych," they said half banteringly; "gie us a bit o' un."

Upbraiding and cynicism had left his words. He spoke quietly—almost solemnly.

"You want a speech, comrades," he said with a wan smile. "But I'm not for it to-night. My last roll-call will be on Friday, and I want a good muster. It's not for victory,—we all know that,—

they tell me that's another man's matter—fortune falls into the lap of some, if not into yours and mine. You think I've acted badly by you, that I ought to have faced the long odds against us ages ago. Believe me, the defeat is as hard for me as it is for you. If you get a compromise, well and good, I can hardly believe in it. And for the rest, funds, I may tell you, can't hold out after this week. You've not worked hard enough to get them"—the man with the collecting book shrank back as Lester's eye unwittingly fell upon him—"but don't let's part bad friends because of the hopelessness of the struggle. Everything has been against us from the first, and you've not"——he stopped, fearing to be betrayed into fresh recrimination.

Some slight applause broke out. For the minute the magnetic spell of his personality had fallen again on these disheartened rebellious men. Two or three young fellows pressed forward, crying:—

"The foight ain't over yet, Mester. Weyn stick ter yew an' th' cause to th' end, if wey dee fer it."

But the rest were silent, and Lester with throbbing pulses felt that the scene was a shifting one. Hunger gnawed in these men's stomachs, despair at their hearts; all other emotions could be but transitory. He shook his head.

"No, lads—it's too late for the dying job—that'll come in your beds like good Christians."

There was hardly a trace of cynicism in his voice, only a great weariness, and the boys slunk back disappointed.

"Who'll bey the speaker on Friday night?" asked a tall man on the right, whose notoriety for making speeches was proverbial.

A sudden resolve came to Lester.

"No one from a distance," he said, "I've asked Miss Stanier to speak."

A slight murmur ran through the room, but he went on unheeding.

"She can speak better than most men, and she risks public opinion boldly. She'll make you feel, even at this last minute, that there's something in the great cause after all."

Dead silence greeted this statement. Lester felt instantly that the announcement was not popular, and seizing his triumph of the preceding minute before it waned, he left them with a nod.

Once in the street he stood still on the pavement.

"Why did I drag her in?" he mused, "why—why? There's no counting on her speech, no sureness of our ever meeting again—and they don't want her, that's certain, but I owed her an apology and I gave her an advertisement, and we're quits, entirely quits."

But even with this conviction he knew that to-morrow she might overthrow it. Her determination to address his meeting was a resolve she meant to adhere to—and she might if she pleased; but to allow her a chance to revive that past moment of foolery was impossible. Privacy must at all costs be avoided in their interviews during the next few days. He would meet her in the Club-room—he would ask the secretary of the Union to take possession of his study if she wished to come there—no—better still, he would go away. Half a dozen points for the speech could be explained to her in an hour, on his return. Besides, from her an unprepared something would, in its freshness, carry more weight with the general public.

Yes, he would go away to-night; surely it was the wisest plan; the desire to go was over-mastering—he longed to expiate his folly to his own satisfaction; if that was ever to be done, he knew it could only be in one place.

There was a late train that he might yet catch. He walked on quickly; as he walked the face of the little child to whom he had sung his song floated like a will-o-the-wisp before him, in the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XIV

NEW SURROUNDINGS

AS Lester had stated, on this Tuesday evening there was an "At Home" at the Big House.

The manufacturers of the district had no desire to quit the scene of their labours and its reward, for more fashionable quarters. Their domains were scattered among the wooded, picturesque hills beyond the town, and the white and red brick buildings—some of them dating back several centuries—made square patches of colour among the elm and sycamore trees.

The rushing tide of commerce that bears men from penury to prosperity had treated their quiet artistic trade with respect. The grandsons were much as the grandfathers—neither rich nor poor. With no prospect under existing laws of becoming millionaires, they shrank with true refinement from pretending to be such, and lived without arrogance, and with very little ostentation, sedate and honourable, if somewhat narrow, lives.

In all matters it was conceded that Nevill Lawrence, owner of the Big House, took the lead. He had a shrewd knowledge of art, and strove to collect around him pictures and objects of vertu, which became to him one by one almost like household gods. In all the rooms and passages, curios and ancient furniture filled nook and corner, and in his sanctum, behind the heavy printed velvet curtains, the walls were covered with china and bric-a-brac, bearing severally their period and their history. Yet for these

things there was no lavish expenditure; when duty and an unclaimed balance at his bankers allowed him, he bought warily, with the caution of a connoisseur, and would wait a year or two on occasions to secure a coveted china plate or a bronze medallion.

This hobby, however, was outside the ordinary routine of his life. A staunch Tory and chairman of the Conservative Club, he sat on the board of companies which necessitated weekly visits to London and Manchester. Fair to his work-people, if not exactly fatherly, he attended his office with regularity, and subscribed generously to parish clubs, tea-meetings, and all the other philanthropic schemes which act as stimulants to a section of society.

But in his business he resented strongly any kind of interference. He disparaged trade-unions, co-operative, and all other progressive movements of the time. He made it a boast that he had never read an economic treatise, or listened to a speech on economic matters in his life, and although perfectly aware of the present conditions affecting his trade, he felt bitterly about the strike, and had hitherto refused to consider a compromise. To the sufferings in the town, however, it could not be said that he was callous. His wife and daughters still tramped through the mud to carry slices of cold mutton and rice pudding to the hungry families, and to his credit be it said that he added an extra sovereign to the poor box in the parish church every Sunday morning.

Philip Assheton was a frequent and welcome visitor at the Big House. His quick intelligence, and ready sympathy won him favour. It had given him a long winter's work to move Nevill Lawrence from his fixed opinions regarding the strike, or to vary his testy cries: "I've been just to my men; this is how they repay me"—"they must be forced to submission"—"I'm sorry for them, but they must

learn who are the masters"—and so on—and he confessed to weary walks along the elm avenue that led from the hill to the schoolhouse, the rage in his enthusiastic young mind, alternating between this man's friendly narrow-minded obstinacy, and Robert Lester's wilful wickedness, in prolonging a condition of affairs which presented so hopeless an outlook.

Yet lately things had improved; Lawrence had shown an inclination during Assheton's visits to let the conversation touch on the condition of the people, to argue points, rather than to ignore them, as he had hitherto done; and since in Stoneyard it was often a case of where Lawrence walked, all his fellows raced, hope regarding his cherished compromise revived in Assheton's mind.

Then came the issue of invitations for this party, in honour of Doll Lawrence's eighteenth birthday. The eldest of a trio of pretty girls with distinct social aspirations, she was the darling of her father's heart. Invitations reached the schoolhouse. John Stanier had always held aloof from social gatherings, and lately his daughter had expressed contempt for them. Laurina Assheton could never be drawn from her chimney corner. Philip, on the contrary, accepted the summons eagerly, determined to find in this festive reunion of the masters an occasion to press home, with all vehemence, the need of immediate action in this matter of the compromise. His endeavour was to bring about a conference between them and the men's committee, if possible before the end of the week.

After his scene with Agnes, however, on the morning of the day in question, all ardour left him.

Never had the school-hours dragged so slowly as through that afternoon. The girl's wild words and his own wild answers echoed continually in his ears.

What fiend had forced him at the very moment when he should have been strongest, to be weak—yes, considering all he believed in, all he was striving to do —pitiably weak. Truly, if he had lost hope forever now, it was his own fault, he had no one to blame but himself. What a display he had made of useless anger; what humbug his vaunted faith and principles must have seemed to her.

And yet, could he have known and believed it, he had been nearer to the girl then, than he had ever been before. He had revealed an unexpected side of his nature, and until Lester claimed her undivided attention, she had seen his face, in memory, as it looked during those moments of passion, again and again, and had wondered, with a wonder which was more than a mere passing curiosity.

It was a little past nine at the Big House. A buzz of conversation filled the oblong, brightly-lit drawing-room. On the bronze-tinted, silken suite of sofas and gilt chairs, several women were seated, blinking a little in the brilliant, unbecoming electric light, cast through tinted globes that hung from the ceiling. The rustle of their skirts as they moved further apart, the buzz of conversation, and the continual movement of heads and fans towards the group of talking men gathered round a crackling log fire, made it obvious that dinner was no longer anticipated, but had been enjoyed.

A tall man stood in the middle of the group. The cut of his long frock coat, his black silken vest and immaculate white collar, proclaimed him a dandy in the clerical profession. He held a coffee-cup of green Japanese ware in his left hand, and even while he waved the tiny spoon between the finger and thumb of his right, occasionally sucking the candy from its tip with delicacy and deliberation, he led the discussion.

"To me," he said in a slow raucous voice, "the

situation is not so serious as you imagine. The whole thing has been a storm in a tea-cup—I assure you, a storm in a tea-cup."

"My dear Burgoyne, it's all very well for you to talk of a storm in a tea-cup," objected a dapper little man in a flowered silk waistcoat; "a whirlwind in my pocket, if you like—there's certainly nothing left in it. Who's to pay the piper this winter, Lord knows; with the silk trade slipping away from us, we may as well put up shutters at once."

"And go to Coventry," chimed in Mr Burgoyne, waggling the tea-spoon facetiously, "that would certainly be a case of all the fat in the fire."

The Rev. Bass-Burgoyne was fond of trite quotations. He threw up his grey, well-shaven chin, and crunched a grain of candy.

Mr Lawrence turned his large head inquiringly. The iron grey mop of hair that fell over his intelligent brow suggested the attentions of a holly-hedge, rather than a hair-brush.

"You're the person who ought to do something, Burgoyne," he said. "All these dyers are in your parish."

"Oh, we poor priests!—we poor priests. We're supposed to do everything, and to do nothing. Come now, Lawrence, you at least will allow that two swallows don't make a summer?"

His host looked mystified.

"What's that got to do with it?" he said.

"Simply that one poor priest can't stop a strike. All I can do is to give advice—and I assure you I do give it."

"Well, our ladies have done their best to keep the mischief going," grumbled the man of the flowered waistcoat, flicking his trousers with a handkerchief; "soup kitchens, Dorcas societies, and all that kind of nonsense."

"There, Cook," chimed in the clergyman, "I'm

with you. I was dead against those soup kitchens from the first—such insolent obstinacy as we have had to contend with. But what am I to do when the ladies insist?—what is anyone to do when a lady insists? I assure you half my congregation has been at me for a week, yes, yes—your good wives too, and now a third soup kitchen is in full swing. Although I manage mine on superior lines, my parish has followed the bad example of the others. Under such circumstances," he concluded sententiously, "a united front is an impossibility."

There was a chorus of feminine denials.

"What's that you're saying about soup kitchens, Mr Burgoyne," cried a woman in a high, clear voice, which, attuned to a deaf husband, kept its pitch in general company from forgetfulness. "I suppose you don't remember that when you made that collection for the wounded Spanish soldiers, and the building of the church in Swaziland, that nice curate of yours, Mr Green, insisted on putting away something to start the soup kitchen? Now you're blaming us."

Mr Burgoyne looked at her. His front teeth were uneven and discoloured; as he smiled he drew down his long upper lip, a habit to conceal them which gave his mouth an unpleasant twist.

"My dear Mrs Hobson," he said blandly, "pray don't make me responsible for the opinions of my curate. In these up-to-date times the vicar is expected to provide the stipend, but not the persuasions of his fellow-labourers. That excellent young man, I'm glad to say, has moved to a more appreciative parish."

"Appreciative! We all thought Mr Green a jewel."

"He was fortunate in having in your good opinion so fair a setting," replied Mr Burgoyne, bowing towards the speaker with a mannerism that deprecated possible applause for the aptness of the remark.

"Seriously," continued the lady, "these poor people —aren't you sorry for them? The district visitor persuaded me to go to one or two houses in the town yesterday. I shall not easily forget the experience, and I heard some things, gossip perhaps, that made me think that Mr—the agitator—what do you call him?—ought to be horse-whipped, and the girl—well, what do you think of that girl, Mr Burgoyne?"

The shrill emphatic tones filled the room. At Mrs Hobson's personal allusion the desultory talk around her ceased. Every one looked up expectantly.

Mr Burgoyne coughed.

"That's putting me a difficult question," he said. "Undoubtedly this Lester is a rogue. His pernicious influence has been poison in the place, in fact, I may say it's intensely immoral. I can't quite understand where he comes from. I've made a point of avoiding him. They tell me he's interesting, but these people that are called interesting now-a-days are very dangerous."

"Is that the mysterious stranger?" asked Miss Lawrence; "I've met him twice at the post-office. He's got such a handsome profile."

"The profile may account for the extraordinary behaviour of John Stanier's daughter," suggested one of the younger men, laughing.

Mr Burgoyne searched intently for the last grain of sugar at the bottom of his cup. "John Stanier's daughter is certainly a most peculiar girl—most peculiar," he said. "But if the dreadful things one hears are true"—his voice descended to an undertone—"mind you, I really hardly feel justified in believing them—it was only yesterday reported to me——" he broke off, waiting for some encouragement to deliver his information. It came to him from the women. They crowded round as listeners, driving the men from the hearth-rug, and standing,

their arms round each other's waists, or their fingers smoothing out a refractory bow, full of intense curiosity as to what Mr Burgoyne had heard yesterday. He finished his sentence in a murmur, and there was a general outcry of "How dreadful!"

"You don't mean to say that pretty, independent child at the school-house has gone to the dogs?" said a dark, thin man from the corner, guessing at the information. "I thought she was only one of the new school."

"Ah!" censured Mr Burgoyne—"that vulgar, hackneyed phrase. The cloak for so much evil. You remember the days of the prosperity of Pompeii—and what undermined the Roman empire—that freedom between the sexes, and the depravity of the era? I say this," he continued, "at the risk of shocking you—the time when men and women, without shame, disported themselves in the public baths. Yet, to my mind, the things they do nowadays are worse, far worse—this equality of the sexes prognosticates the downfall of our country."

"Oh, not so bad as that, Burgoyne, not so bad as that," interposed a young man, winking facetiously as he recognised the clergyman's favourite illustration of vice. "You must expect us to splash about in some form or another, if it isn't in a public bath, at the end of the nineteenth century. Remember we've got a big swim into the next thousand. Now a graceful girl on a bicycle——" he put up his black-rimmed eye-glass and looked at the assembled company.

There was a self-conscious titter among the girls—the conversation was saved.

Mr Burgoyne still declaimed his oracular platitudes to the lady with the high-pitched voice, but the set by the fireplace broke up; the men filled in the gaps between the women, balancing themselves in uncomfortable attitudes on the light chairs, and heaping,

after the manner of their sex, as they laughed and chaffed, little mounds of cigarette ash on the inlaid tables.

Half an hour later, when all discussion had merged into general babble, Philip Assheton stalked into the room.

"Hulloa, Assheton!" exclaimed a jocular voice, "where do you drop from? you don't mean to say we've called you up from the slums to light the bedroom candles?"

Philip laughed without embarrassment, as a perfect chorus of questions assailed him.

"Better late than never! How d'y do, Mrs Lawrence. I told you I couldn't dine. It's perfectly true I've been in the town. I've come with definite news to-night."

"What an energetic person you are, Mr Assheton," sighed his hostess.

"Only when it's necessary; and it's undoubtedly necessary just now."

"My dear fellow, do give yourself a rest. Shall we have a game of whist?" suggested Mr Lawrence.

"Yes, delighted, if you'll teach me the rules, but——"

"'But'—— means you'd rather talk shop first?"

"Perhaps," answered Philip.

The men laughed at his eagerness, and began to saunter towards him. A fresh group formed round the fire, and the women, appreciating the new comer, mingled with it. Mr Burgoyne reluctantly vacated his post of honour, and threw himself into an armchair. It was evident that he did not welcome Assheton.

"I suppose," he drawled, as he took up the paper, "that none of you have seen about this mutiny in Egypt. Poor young Crayford killed!"

No one had heard the news, and for a moment, showered with their enquiries, and in sole posses-

sion of the "Evening Mail," he held his rival at bay.

Philip stood leaning against the marble mantelpiece, silently watching with his tired, serious eyes the faces around him. Faces, that without particular beauty or distinction, struck him as being eminently complacent and contented. Each one bore the stamp of a certain intelligence, a certain good nature. The manufacturer with the shrewd eye, and the manufacturer's son, the pattern of the father without the shrewdness of eye ; the wives and daughters, the wife motherly and smooth-haired, clinging with a tenacity of her own to the homeliness of the past—the girls flippant and fluffy-headed.

They were a respectable lot of people these, he considered ; narrow, conservative, moral and entirely happy. His mission was of more importance than his milieu, but he felt conscience-stricken for an instant at his own earnestness, it seemed so absurdly out of place.

"I'm afraid," he said, fixing his eye on the clean-shaven rotund countenance of the Rev. Bass, "that I'm more concerned in our struggles at home than in the skirmishes in Africa. It seems to me the farther things are away, the more interest people take in them."

The clergyman looked up for an instant over the edge of the paper. His voice was slightly more raucous than before.

"Impetuous young men like yourself, Mr Assheton, have a trick of making mountains out of mole-hills. To compare our foreign affairs with these social squabbles at home is quite ridiculous. Before you came I had been stating, and I'm sure I can answer that we all firmly believe it, that this strike you're so absorbed in, if met by firm action, will prove to be nothing but a storm in a tea-cup. You, my dear sir, arrive without possibly having dined '—here Mr

Burgoyne suppressed a slight hiccough which hinted of his own repletion—"in a mode that suggests a message from the Queen, or the news that the Town Hall is on fire."

"On fire!" said Philip, unable to restrain his indignation, "there will be worse things than fire in the place presently—ruin and starvation are abominations that leave traces on the bodies and souls of men."

"And why," urged the other, unwilling to allow any one else to get a word in edgeways, "are these things so? Simply that revolt from the divine teaching of submission brings its own punishment—by-the-bye, Mr Assheton, I don't wish to interfere, but in common fairness to your hostess I think you should notice that your shoes are covered with mud."

There was a general laugh. Half a dozen lace-bordered handkerchiefs were offered mockingly to the young man. He reddened.

"I'm quite aware," he said, with a shrug of impatience, struggling to ignore the clergyman's impertinence, "that neither my clothes nor my mood are suited to this room."

"Oh, you didn't come here to amuse us then—fie! Mr Assheton, what a wet blanket," cried Mrs Hobson.

"Well, let's hear what your mood is," said Mr Lawrence good-humouredly. "It's the old story, I conclude—not fair to take advantage of us after dinner."

"I hope you haven't been doing too much patting on the back in your purlieus," added Mr Cook, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"That's the danger—that's the danger," said the parson. "You young Oxonians with your perversion of the tenets of Christianity, with your political views of eternal problems, are very alarming people among the masses."

"Not so alarming, Mr Burgoyne, as your religion of inaction," retorted Assheton, nettled out of all self-restraint. "You, and the few that are left like you, would, if you could, lull us in perpetual slumber. The church of the younger generation is awake, thank God for it! Why shouldn't we have a little social idealism in our religion? Development is not a one-sided affair. It's for every branch of existence—for every class. We're right to insist on the meaning of words, not on the sound of them. I'm sick to death of the obstinate orthodoxy that refuses to extend its limits, or to free itself from shams.

Mr Burgoyne smiled indulgently.

"I don't intend quarrelling with you on this point. When we have one bishop presiding at a Co-operative Society's meeting, and another addressing an Independent Labour Party, or whatever that organisation is called, you young men have a right to your conceit, and we old-fashioned ones must take a back place. Bless me! I suppose I've lived sixty years in the world to your thirty, and I shouldn't like to say the number of relief works, if I may so express it, I've seen started from the bosom of the Church—sewing guilds, friendly societies, soup kitchens, temperance guilds—I'm sorry owing to the doctor's orders I am no longer president of the one in my own parish—bands of hope—in fact, an endless list. I'm not very, ve-ry clever," he went on, stroking his silk waistcoat as if in apology to himself for so much short-coming, "but I don't consider these things shams. The Church has not behaved quite so disgracefully as you think, Mr Assheton, in the past, although you were not there to enlighten it."

"You're beside the question," said Philip. "Go on, spreading ointment on the surface of things if you will; we need the charities—all of them. But a

Church attacking things radically from below, letting its pulpit theories become its every-day action, applying religion to the special rules of a factory as well as to a prayer meeting, a Church that draws the rich from their self-content, the poor from their ignorant wretchedness, and that no longer picks and chooses its virtues, that's what I want to see, and that's what's coming, I'm persuaded."

"I sincerely trust our Church will have nothing to do with this breaking down of class distinction; the way we're criticised from within and without at present is disgraceful," said Mr Burgoyne warmly. "It'll be so much the worse for theology. The only outcome will be disestablishment. The mischief you radicals would play if you could with my dear old Mother is beyond belief."

Mr Burgoyne heaved a sigh. His allusion to his dear old mother—presumably the Church—had a tone of complaint in it, such as a nurse uses to her best friend about a refractory baby. He and Philip had been left to themselves. The rest of the party had fidgeted and dispersed, confessing with yawns that such topics were impossible.

Assheton had unwillingly allowed himself to be drawn into this *tête-à-tête*. He resented being monopolized by Burgoyne and his tirades, fearful of losing his advantage with the others.

To-night he had come, straight from the heart of the town, where little children were hungry, and little children were dying, where the resisting power of the strikers had oozed out in a sort of half-awakened terror at the grip of physical suffering—to this room of mirth and brightness where life had forgotten death.

With knitted brows Philip looked from one to the other around him. Beside him the parson lounged, rich in argument and self-indulgence—the girls and young men whispered eagerly together in knots,

and his hostess played contentedly at patience in the corner. Mr Lawrence had drifted away with his daughter to the bezique table. They were only types these, and perfectly innocent types; there was no real reason to condemn the carelessness of these people to life outside their existence and enjoyments, the life of those that knew neither hope nor comfort. But he watched the ghastly indifference of it all, remembering that the world formed its judgments, its appreciation of all society, by types. It seemed to him in his bitterness that the shadow of ineptitude and lifelessness hung as surely over these men and women, as it hung now over the back streets of the town.

If there had been less tension in his mind, if he had not been unnerved by his recent self-condemnation and disappointment, he might have taken a wider view of the position — he might have found time for subtler analysis and seen the truer, fairer side of the picture. As it was, he resolved that he must brook no delay, but through the very light-heartedness of their mood, bring these manufacturers to a decision to-night. Then to scotch Lester's folly, by inducing the strikers to be reasonable and accept a *bonâ fide* offer from the masters—that would be the climax. The compromise might truly offer small advantage to them—it might be but a pin-prick in the Gordian knot of the problems of the trade—but it would be a pin-prick of value, for it carried hope for the future upon its point.

CHAPTER XV

PHILIP GAINS A POINT

IN such a frame of mind Philip crossed to the other side of the room.

"Mr Lawrence," he said, then he paused for a girl laughed merrily.

"Rubied, papa," she interrupted, tossing down her cards, "three times running. You owe me seven shillings and sixpence."

Doll leant back in her chair, and let her gaze rove over the young schoolmaster's upright figure as he stood by the table. He went on speaking.

"It's very important that we should get that talk over this evening, but—" catching the girl's eye—"of course I can wait—an hour, if you will—any time, as long as the postponement of your decision is a question of minutes, not of days."

Mr Lawrence stretched himself and rose slowly from his small velvet chair. "Dear me—dear me," he said, "you carry us all off our legs, my friend. I shan't invite you to any more of my parties."

"I think you're very rude, Mr Assheton," chimed in the girl, "not to ask me whether you may take papa away. What's your important question? You're dreadfully fussy about it."

She held her well-groomed little head on one side, and darted reproof coquettishly out of her sharp brown eyes.

Philip felt awkward, but determined. He smiled and murmured some apology, but a slight unwitting movement of his hand upon the table, sufficed to

demolish the house of cards Doll had been building in the last few moments.

"You clumsy person!" she exclaimed before he could speak, giving a tap to his arm with her white gloved fingers. "Now I'm going to punish you. If you take papa away I shall listen to every word you say to him; he's going to do exactly as I tell him—you see if he doesn't," and with an arch look succeeding the rebuke, and a flutter of her muslin skirts, she clung to her father's elbow.

"By all means listen," Philip answered gravely; "you may do me good service."

Mr Lawrence smiled at his daughter.

"My girl wants extravagances—not retrenchments—you won't find her a useful supporter, I fear. Let's go into the billiard-room."

A straggling column of men, unheeding the execrations of the ladies, followed Mr Lawrence's bidding.

On the threshold of the next room the latter paused.

"'A stitch in time saves nine,' Burgoyne would have remarked had he seen us." He pointed with a chuckle to the sleeper in the arm-chair. "An extraordinary person that for snores, for argument, and for enjoying a good dinner. 'Pon my word I believe that's a parson's proper vocation. I don't like your threat of increased activity, Assheton—it'll be the very dickens."

Philip did not answer. As he looked at the stout unconscious form, he felt that his repugnance was tempered by the knowledge of how soon in the Church he loved, such species would be extinct.

Mr Lawrence let the heavy curtains, which separated the two rooms, fall as they passed from the drawing-room. The men settled themselves on the big red sofas ranged along the walls. They had adopted that air of strained attention which anticipates an oration.

Mr Lawrence stood a little uneasily on the bear-

skin rug beside Philip Assheton. His daughter, her draperies spread in a halo around her, dropped into an artistic attitude on the footstool. She contemplated the young schoolmaster with her enigmatical bright eyes.

Determined to command attention, to excite interest, he had shaken off all listlessness. What he wanted, what, in the strength of his desire he knew he would gain, was a "yea" for his "yea" and a "nay" for his "nay"—in fact, complete control of the position.

"Not exactly the sort of relaxation I had expected," puffed young Milne through a cloud of cigarette-smoke into his companion's ear. "How ridiculously serious that fellow looks."

"I'm quite sure you wish me at the bottom of the sea," Philip was saying, "especially when I tell you it's the old question of the strike I'm sticking to; but, upon my soul, things have got to such a pass I don't see how they can continue in this way much longer."

"That's just what I've said the last six weeks," said Nevill Lawrence, "how can they?—where does the money come from? I was led to believe the Union was the weakest in the country, and yet somehow the business hangs on."

"The thing is simple enough," said Mr Cook from the sofa, "that fellow Robert Lester gets them the money."

"Well, it can't be inexhaustible, that money of his. They must turn tail like whipped curs presently."

"I should like, for curiosity's sake, to know how much Lester and his party are worth," suggested another.

"That depends on what you like to capitalise Miss Stanier at. From what you've all been saying, you can't count one without the other," and George Milne laughed.

Philip Assheton felt as if a hand had grasped him by the throat. Luckily for himself he had escaped

the earlier conversation about Agnes Stanier, but now for a second his words failed him.

"Can you find out anything more about the mischievous fellow, Philip?" asked Mr Lawrence turning to him.

"Not much," he replied evasively. "Very little I may say, but apart from anything Robert Lester may do," he went on hurriedly, "the situation is appallingly serious. To come to the matter of the compromise—are you still opposed to it?"

"Of course we're opposed to it," said Mr Cook, with quick decision, "as I told Lawrence only this morning, a compromise would make a shockingly bad precedent. Fools they've been, and as fools they must bear their own punishment. I said we shouldn't give way an inch, didn't I, Lawrence?"

That gentleman moved his ponderous body awkwardly and looked at the speaker.

"Yes, I suppose you did."

Philip smiled.

"The old question of precedent I see—always a curious excuse. There are heaps of people who won't give a sixpence in charity because they say if they help one thing they must help another. It's rather a rotten theory, don't you think so?"

"Rotten or not rotten, it's a theory that has kept a good many men from the poorhouse," replied Mr Cook warmly.

"And a few from the Kingdom of Heaven," Philip suggested as an aside.

"The first moment possible the dyers ought to have twenty-one shillings," remarked a thin man in the corner who had not spoken before. "The wages they receive now are miserably inadequate; an average ten hours at 17s. a week."

Philip turned to him eagerly.

"If that's what you think—if ultimately better times are coming—why can't you offer them on the

same hours a shilling advance now? I know they'd be satisfied. I know they'd go in to work on Monday; they would begin to feel their legs again."

"Don't pay attention to Travers. His work is not affected by the strike, so it's easy for him to preach."

"Still he's right," persisted Philip.

"I don't see any right in the matter," argued Mr Cook; "the trade in the country is in a most effete condition. All our hopes about it are floating in thin air."

"Right or wrong, are you sure they'd be allowed to accept the compromise?" added Mr Lawrence. "A few weeks ago they wouldn't have considered it —why should they be in a more reasonable frame of mind now? You're taking things too much for granted."

"No, I'm not," replied Assheton; "there's been a material change in the last few weeks—a complete alteration in the temper of the people. Give them the chance of the compromise and they'll jump at it; you'll start work again as friends instead of foes."

"Not if that agitating devil, Robert Lester, forbids it. I hear he's got another of those meetings of his up for Friday night, and the girl to speak for him. Nothing like a talking woman to drown men's common-sense. I remember a curious thing," Mr Cook let his glass drop from his eye and ring against his shirt studs, "it was when——"

"What woman?" asked Philip harshly, interrupting him, "what woman's going to speak?"

"What woman? — why Miss Stanier, of course. Really, Assheton, you ought to keep Stanier in order about his girl; a hot-headed, extraordinary little person, with such a pretty face. I hardly think that he rouses himself sufficiently even to hear of her goings-on."

"I think you must be mistaken about Miss Stanier's speaking," interposed Philip, with his heart thumping

so loudly against his side that he felt that every one in the room must hear it. "She helps Lester by type-writing, I don't think she's likely to support him on the platform. To my knowledge she has never spoken in her life."

There was a laugh from the sofa.

"All the more reason she should now," cried the aggressive Milne. "What a flat you are! A girl of that sort, well-coached, will be a master-stroke in Lester's hand among all those men. It's pretty obvious that you and your compromise will be knocked out—a thousand to one on it."

A miserable resentment burned within Assheton. But he answered doggedly, looking down at his feet as he moved them about in the bear-skin rug.

"I feel sure you're mistaken," he repeated; "I don't think Miss Stanier will speak. I think it's some of the usual idle gossip about the place."

George Milne looked annoyed.

"I tell you I heard it first hand, but," he added sarcastically, "as you see Miss Stanier every day, she has probably told you all about it."

"No, she has not spoken to me," and lifting his head Philip went back to his subject, tearing at it again desperately, with a stronger light in his eyes. Backwards and forwards for the next half hour they flung their claims and criticisms. Presently he began to feel that opinion was breaking around him, that some were beginning to see as he saw, that a few, on the other hand, were forfeiting reason in their objections, and growing obstinate. The group split up. There were consultations between one and the other in lowered tones.

"You'll be making a huge mistake, Lawrence," said Mr Cook in an angry voice, looking very much flustered after a ten minutes' endeavour to quarrel with Assheton on a technical detail, "a very great

mistake, but of course what you do, as I said before, we shall all do."

"I object to giving way," said Nevill Lawrence feebly, "but I'm not sure it won't be a mistake to hold out. I believe we shall suffer less in the long run by offering the advance, than by the continuance of the strike."

"But the strike won't continue," persisted his irascible neighbour; "absolute firmness and we'll drive them in before the week's out, see if we don't. We've put ourselves to so much inconvenience during these few months that a question of a day more or less can't affect us."

"I don't like it," said Mr Lawrence, shaking his head, "I confess I don't like it at all."

"Give them the thin end of the wedge and they'll only ask for more. We're hard up enough as it is, but it's very plain that Charlie will have to go to Radley instead of to Eton—he had set his heart on Eton—and we shall have to settle at Blackpool for the summer, and drop our proposed trip to Homburg. What do you think of that for a change, Miss Doll?"

"Oh, we must go to Homburg," chimed in the girl, glad of a chance of being heard,—"we must indeed. Mrs Cook promised to take me with her—I'm told it's a ripping place."

"Very well then, my dear, arrange it with this young man—but remember what I say, a rise of wage for the dyers—no dresses—no Homburg—no holidays in fact—it's for you to decide."

"Oh, it's come to that, has it? I always knew that I should have to settle the matter," she darted her most arch look at Philip.

"Now, come, Mr Assheton——" she began.

Philip cut her short.

"Not just yet, Miss Lawrence, please. There's one side of the picture I want to put before you, after my dry economic facts. The sentimental side,

perhaps, but you ought to know it exists—after that,—ask me what you will."

The girl pouted a little.

"I believe you're going to try and make me cry," she said. "You're going to tell us long stories of starving people, and then say we're killing them. Oh, I know! I read no end of tales of the same sort in the *Daily Chronicle* yesterday,—in father's study."

There was a general laugh.

"Since when this literature, Lawrence?"

Mr Lawrence did not reply. Now that his daughter had taken up the cudgels he was absorbed in her encounter, watching her affectionately.

"You know," said Philip, "in spite of what Mr Cook says, that you'll lose more money by this strike than by an advance of wage. It's a well-known fact that although people waste time railing against injustice, that justice breeds justice."

"Papa won't lose much money any way," said the girl. "Thank goodness, he's got shares in such a lot of companies, he needn't bother about this horrid old silk at all, need you, dear?"

Mr Lawrence's complexion took a deeper tinge.

"Go on, Assheton," he said hurriedly, "finish your say. I'm turning the whole thing over in my mind—I believe something can be done."

Then Assheton, loosening the control of his cold facts, told them all he had seen—all he knew, sparing no tale of suffering, pleading with them in the language of sentiment, wakening emotions of pity, until at last the repartees and objections seemed forgotten. There fell upon the company the stillness of listeners, and he began to feel that what he wanted would be his at last.

"And so that's all," he said, winding up the story; "nothing exaggerated—nothing left out. The case is as plain as a pike-staff, isn't it? Won't it move you to a favourable decision?"

Doll Lawrence had crept up from her seat near the floor and hung on the edge of the billiard-table. Her feet dangled above the ground, and while he talked, her little white arm worked backwards and forwards, as she rolled the red and white balls slowly, one after another, towards the corner pocket. When Philip had finished speaking, she glanced at him with her bird-like expression, meditating.

A strong desire filled the girl to make herself important—to win the gratitude of this original young man. Conquests of value were rarely to be made in Stoneyard—admirers and admiration were at a premium.

She fixed Philip with a long inquiring stare; he didn't seem to notice her at all, she thought. He had grown quite silent; why didn't he look at her and ask her point blank to be on his side?

Someone would have to speak soon for the silence was unnatural. Mr Cook had already put up his eye-glass in preparation for another outbreak. Doll slid down on to the floor, and went back to the fireplace. She stood between the two big men, her head leaning against her father's shoulder.

"Do you know it's my birthday?" she said in a clear voice.

"Of course it is!" exclaimed Mr Cook, seeing a grand loop-hole of escape from a disagreeable topic. "What a shame that we should have wasted the evening." He held out his arm. "Miss Doll, let me re-conduct you to the drawing-room? Gentlemen, the debate is adjourned sine die."

"No," she said with a little stamp of her foot, "it's not that. I don't want you to be funny. Don't think I'm bored at your debate—I'm not in the least, but I've got a proposal to make, and as it's my birthday you've all got to do as I like. I propose," she went on, lifting her arms over her head like a sorceress delivering an incantation, "that

these dyers should be offered to-morrow morning,—an advance of a shilling—isn't that it, Mr Assheton? on their present wage."

"Well, there's nothing very new in that."

"Don't all speak at once. There's something very new in it coming from me; it's different, of course, from Mr Assheton, he'll go on trying to help poor people, and stopping strikes all his life—but for me—I wanted to go to Homburg, wanted it dreadfully—well, now I'd rather you gave a shilling to the dyers." Her cheeks flushed—she was a little excited over her self-sacrifice.

"What a queen of the unexpected you are," said Mr Cook testily. "Why this quick change?"

"Why? First, because Mr Assheton told me a lot of things I didn't know before, and I like to be told things I don't know. Then although every word he said was true, he didn't make me cry, he only made me make up my mind. It was all true, what you said, Mr Assheton, wasn't it?"

"Every word."

"Then I'll make two dozen petticoats for the needlework guild right off, and all you men, you might give me your old clothes for it too. I promised to send them sixty last year, and I only sent them six!"

"I expect you'll send them nothing at all next year," said George Milne.

"Never mind about next year. I want you to give that shilling rise now. Papa, dear, say you want them to," she continued coaxingly, "say you'll do it and then they must."

Mr Lawrence hesitated.

"It's the principle of the thing, little daughter. Are you sure you understand about it all? It's rather too serious a subject to make a game of."

"But I'm so serious, papa. Don't talk about principles. Just say 'yes,' won't you?" She ap-

pealed to her audience: "If father says he'll meet the strikers to-morrow morning, will you too? I don't suppose it's all the strikers, but some of them who take the lead. Hold up your hands," she cried, waving her's high above her head. As she did so, the muslin sleeve fell back, leaving her arms bare to the shoulder. "Hold up your hands," she insisted imperatively.

It was difficult to resist her: for the guests of the evening impossible. Mr Lawrence, with an indulgent laugh, held up his hand, shaking his head the while —then George Milne—and two other young fellows. Philip frowned; he felt the thing was a monstrous farce.

"Come now, Mr Cook!" she cried, still in her graceful attitude; "Mr Arrowsmith, what are you doing lighting that cigar? That's right, Mr Hobson; now, Mr Cook, do you hear? Mr Arrowsmith, please, before I count three."

"Will you give me a kiss into the bargain?" said Mr Cook, still demurring.

"A kiss? Certainly not! I'm not ten years old. Hold up your hands, do you hear? I'll dance with you," she added, making a concession, "twice at my birthday ball, if you like."

"But, my pet, we can't have a birthday ball if the dyers get this advance," objected Mr Lawrence from the background.

"Don't be silly, father, dear—we'll talk about it presently. Now, all the arms are up, aren't they? Yes—oh yes—Mr Assheton, we've won."

She turned breathlessly to Philip, her eyes dancing. He stood with darkened brow.

"Do they really mean it?" he said stiffly. "Are you sure?"

"Mean it!" she cried, disappointed at his coldness, "of course they mean it—they've got to mean it. What time do you want them to meet the dyers?—

eleven o'clock?—we shall be awfully late to-morrow morning."

"The time suits very well, thank you," said Philip coldly.

"Eleven o'clock to-morrow morning punctually, do you hear, gentlemen?" she said decisively.

They took her orders with submission.

"All right, Miss Tyrant," came the answer.

After the excitement, a lull. They all deserted the sofa and strolled together into the drawing-room, laughing. Philip, sick at heart, passed hastily by, saying that he must leave.

Doll Lawrence was watching him all the time. Her face was puzzled. As he opened the door into the hall, sudden tears filled her eyes.

"You haven't said a word of thanks, Mr Assheton," she pouted.

He looked back at her.

"Words are hardly needed. You know I'm grateful." There was a perfunctory note in his voice.

"I don't believe you care a bit."

"I care rather too much," he answered.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You're very odd. Anyway, don't forget to tell the dyers it was I who did it for them. I'd like them to know it was my birthday present."

"Yes," said Philip, "if I've the opportunity I'll tell them. Good-night, Miss Lawrence."

She did not answer; as she sauntered after the others, picking to pieces a chrysanthemum that had been pinned in the front of her dress, she flung the petals from her with unnecessary energy.

Some of the men were searching for Assheton.

"You don't mean to say you're off?" they cried. "What mean behaviour! Having left us all condemned as paupers, let's at least offer you our last farthing. I believe if we club together we can afford a whisky and soda!"

"No, not now, thank you," he answered, feeling that he had not the pluck to go back to the drawing-room and face a formal leave-taking with the ladies.

The man addressed as Travers, who had supported Philip's appeal at one moment in the evening, followed him into the ante-room.

"You're disappointed," he said.

"Not disappointed," came the bitter reply, "only I wanted something better."

"Certainly it was a quaint victory."

"The whole thing seems horribly unreal."

"Unreal? Not a bit of it. That girl rules the roost here. A few centuries ago she'd have had all our heads cut off. Mercifully nowadays it's the fashion to keep us alive and to give us favours. You've to thank your good-looking face for that young lady's despotism."

"I don't understand any woman influencing one on such a question," said Philip sternly. "The thing's right or else it isn't."

"Do you mean to tell me that you're still at the alphabet of life," replied Travers, who prided himself on his knowledge of the world. "Don't you know that women set the machinery going in every department?"

"Yes, wise women—good women—" acknowledged Philip, hesitatingly.

"Not a bit. The sillier and the more unscrupulous the greater their power; we are so afraid of acknowledging it. You recollect, don't you, the story of the artist who locked his studio when at work and wouldn't let anybody in: One day as a practical joke the lock was broken off, and he was found sitting on a daïs in a velvet arm-chair while other men were painting his pictures. He was callous to every taunt: 'The pictures are mine,' he insisted, 'I inspire them.' It's the same with everything in life. We may toil from morning till night,

or from night till morning, it's madam with her curls and flounces, and her nose in the air, who claims the inspiration. To my thinking it's idiocy to pretend things are otherwise. He knew a bit who wrote, 'keep close your women under lock and key.'"

Travers, laughing at his own cynicism, stroked his beard with long, thin fingers.

"It's unsatisfactory—very," replied Philip slowly, dusting his hat and putting it on his head.

"Oh no, I don't think so, not as regards the compromise. You must make the men accept. It'll be good business for them. I've been in favour of it all along, you know."

But Philip let this cheerfulness pass without comment. He left the house, thinking only of the other girl who had been dragged so ignobly into the discussion; in spite of his success, he was miserable.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FACE OF DEATH

AT eight o'clock next morning the light was grey. Over the cobble stones a milk-cart rattled, passing up the street; the church bell tolled drearily for a Saints' Day Sacrament. Little children, unobservant of the morning's gloom, scampered merrily along the pavement; in their wake the muffin man walked with his tinkling bell. The life of another day had begun.

From behind the drawn blind in an upper room, Agnes peered out. She shivered a little as she looked into the waking town. Her hair lying loose on her shoulders framed a face that in the half light looked pale, and suddenly aged; she threw herself impatiently into the arm-chair again and, passing a hand across her mouth, yawned, her eyes wide with feverish expectation.

Through what long long hours she had passed, and how strange the dawn. To find her thus watching in a sick man's room, listening to his uneven breathing and restless movements, starting nervously at every hollow cough. But better nauseous surroundings than loneliness. Her spirit, since the previous evening when she had left Lester's study, was possessed by restless misery. How useless to seek sleep when she only wished to return to him, when she was filled with a longing to fling herself at his feet and implore his love and sympathy.

She thought of those dragging midnight hours, when the vision of his hard face, the remembrance

of his cold indifferent goodbye, filled her imagination.

She had lain above the quilt, wrestling with her mad desires; her long white arms outstretched, her hands clenched, rebellious at her own helplessness to silence misgivings. In time, however, she had sobbed herself to sleep, dozing in restless dreams. Then with a great start she had awoke, thinking that she heard Lester's steps beside her in the room, his voice speaking to her. It was a vivid impression, and enveloped in shame at the foolishness of it, she had lit a match, and with flaming cheeks and aching eyes, had written to him—incoherently, imploringly.

"Don't let things change," she wrote. "I rely over all the world on your friendship—I can't live unless I work for you—let me speak at your meeting—I'll speak with my whole soul—it's yours entirely for the cause—I entreat you don't listen to my father—" and so on, with many repetitions. She was frightened at her own action but withal triumphant in the effort. With trembling fingers she had sealed this letter, till at a sound of footsteps in the passage she dropped the wax hastily among the pens. A knock at the door, gentle at first, then rapidly repeated. Her alarm increased. She blew out the candle, and, with beating heart, sat immovable. The door opened an inch or two, and a face had appeared—the face of the housekeeper in her dressing-gown and curl-papers. Greatly relieved, Agnes had sprung from the bed, standing expectantly, tall and slight in her long nightgown. The housekeeper, holding a night light, lifted an arm clad in magenta flannel, and spoke in a rapid whisper:—

"Lor, miss, how you did frighten me!"

"What do you want, Mrs Ellis, then?"

"It's Mr Clulow, miss. He's been terrible bad all night, coughing and coughing and asking for you.

'Tell her to come,' he says, 'I want her—she must come.' I'm just worn out with him."

"Well?" said Agnes unsympathetically.

The woman hesitated.

"If I might snatch half-an-hour's sleep, miss, could you sit with him awhile? It's a lot to ask I know, but——" she broke off, expecting a rebuff.

On another occasion Agnes would have scouted the idea as preposterous. But this night she craved any kind of relief. She hated sickness and sick-rooms, but she hated herself, and her own company far more. Yes, she would go for a little. Perhaps it would please Nicholas; and in the imagination of being a martyr in this rôle of night nurse, she might atone for her foolishness, and forget her heartache.

She gave no promise immediately, but held out the note in her hand.

"Do you see this letter, Mrs Ellis? The envelope is marked 'Immediate.' When the postman calls in the morning he's to take it on. You mustn't forget it."

"Yes, miss, and about——"

"Oh," interrupted Agnes, "about Mr Clulow—I'll go to him. It's a horrid bore. Give me my dressing-gown and some slippers. Ugh! how cold it is."

Thus it was she had taken up her post. The hours to the dawn dragged more slowly than ever. She sat on in the deep wicker-chair under the big grey rug, listening, and from time to time throwing coal upon the fire. On the bed, Nicholas coughed and dozed and tossed with heavy sighs.

The light in due course filtered through the window. She drew back the curtains; the morning was approaching. She had an inclination to go down on the excuse of fetching something to eat, and there to wait at the parlour window till an answer was

brought to her from Lester. The postman might come at any minute. She heard the church clock strike the hour.

A weak voice called.

"Yes, what is it?" she answered.

"Who's there—who's waiting for me?"

"It's I—Agnes Stanier."

From the bed there was a sound as if the sick man were trying to raise himself. The girl kept her head turned obstinately away.

"You, Miss Agnes, you. Come here."

"Why?"

"I knew you would come. You've been hovering over me with white wings all the night."

The wicker-chair creaked as Agnes laid her head against it.

"Go to sleep again—don't talk. Your voice is so husky, I'm sure it's bad for you to talk."

"No, no, I implore you," he wheezed. "I implore you to come to my side. I want you."

The girl gave no answer. She had heard the tramp of the postman. It grew nearer and nearer, but he passed without stopping. From the next room, the door of which stood open, there came a long drawn snore. She sprang up.

"Mrs Ellis has forgotten my letter—I'm sure she's forgotten it."

The housekeeper lay slumbering in a huddled heap upon the sofa; the note was nowhere to be seen. Agnes slipped down the front stairs, but no searching of the letter-box discovered it. She turned wearily. "It must have gone," she said to herself; "of course it must have gone—how restless I am."

She went back to her chair again. On the bed Nicholas had burst into a terrific fit of coughing. The canopy shook with the paroxysm.

"Do you want some raspberry wine, or tea, or anything?" Agnes asked vaguely, feeling that she

might do more for the sufferer, and at the same time shrinking from the thought.

But he could not answer; his coughing seemed to go on and on till it roused her to a definite act. She must go and call the servant and send for the doctor. Her mind was full of plans for escape. She dragged her cold, slippered feet across the room. For one instant, passing the bed, she turned, and the imploring pathetic look in the sick man's bright eyes, nipped her intention and rivetted her to the spot.

"Nicholas," she said, fascinated by his expression and walking slowly towards him; "Nicholas, are you very ill?"

He nodded without speaking; involuntarily she put her hands out to him across the bed, and he took them in his wasted ones.

"I'm in the valley of the shadow," he said, "but my path is the Lord's, the path you will follow after."

His thin hands held her firmly, his lips were moving rapidly as if in prayer, and ever backwards and forwards on the hot pillow the grey head turned uneasily, searching the place where it had first been laid. In spite of her growing fear, Agnes looked at him with curiosity—at the shrunken cheeks, the bluish lips falling a little apart, the uneven teeth: at the eyes full of ecstatic vision, absorbing alone all the life of what otherwise looked like a dead face. Twisting her hands nervously in his unslackened grasp, she launched forth into a commonplace.

"I'm sure you ought to have some restorative. I'm so stupid I don't know anything about it. Let me call Mrs Ellis?"

But he paid no attention.

"My guardian angel," he murmured, looking over her head with an ecstatic, distant expression. "You've been hiding for days and days, but you've got to see me through the valley—through the great

valley. I saved you the other night—you're mine, only mine."

Why did he talk like this? the tension was becoming terrible.

"Nicholas," she insisted, "didn't you hear what I said to you? Let me go—let me go and get you some brandy."

"Yes, yes," he whispered loudly, "the trumpets are blowing, the archangels are shouting. I hear them louder than ever before."

"Mrs Ellis," cried the girl, "Mrs Ellis!"

Would no one come—would no one come?

"A brand snatched from the burning—a brand, they said," he went on, his whispering becoming weaker, more intermittent. "So do you light me to the edge of the grave, and when my spirit flies before you it will carry the message—in the record of the Book it is written—blessed be—blessed be——" the whispering sank to muttering, he shook again with the violence of his cough.

What a cough it was! To her own astonishment Agnes found herself slipping one arm round the poor thin back, felt herself turning sick at his suffering, at the sight of the little patches of blood that stained his mouth. He, exhausted, dropped into the pillows again and released her hands.

Agnes was already in the next room.

"Wake up, Mrs Ellis," she repeated frantically, shaking the figure on the sofa; "wake up." With one last aggressive snore the woman awoke.

"Come to him—fetch the doctor—feed him—do something. He's awfully bad." Then without waiting to see the result of her instructions, she sped along the passage to her own room, locked the door, and sank upon the bed.

For a long time she lay there, her head buried in her hands, distracted by turbulent emotions, ghost-like fears—emotions and fears that she had so long

despised in theory, and that now in fact turned her to a shivering coward. She was cowed by the force of untoward circumstances. The cupboard of fate had been, by her own whim, set with all the things that she prized, all the treasures that she desired; but now that she came to look for them again, they were not there—would never, she knew, be there any more. In their place she found skeletons, horrible, hideous skeletons, which even in their hideousness some impulse drove her to touch and sample. In the act she drew nearer to a comprehension of the meaning of things, the very meaning that she had resolved was meaningless. Out of her own sadness and apprehensions sprang a quickened sympathy towards the sick man and his pain. She would dress quickly, she decided, superstitious, that by the comforting of Nicholas, she would woo to realisation the tantalizing hope about Lester. As she turned her towsled head and slipped from the bed, a gleam of sunshine flashed across the room. It lit up the whiteness of a letter that lay on the green baize tablecover. She took it up and turned it over. There were thumb-marks on the paper, and an illiterate writer had scrawled across the top: "Gone away. Not expected back till Friday morning."

That was all. It was her note to Lester, returned. "How awful," she cried, "he doesn't want me—he doesn't want me!" She burst into a passion of tears.

Many minutes passed before she raised her tear-stained face, and put down the unopened letter. Mechanically, she began to wash and dress, twisting her rebellious curls into partial order, and winding a green ribbon round the neck of her plain dark dress. When she returned to the sick-room there had come to her face a look of self-control which had rarely sat there before, and which gave her, in spite

of her pallor, and the feverish light in her eyes, a touch of splendour.

Nicholas was dozing fitfully. She crossed to the window and stood with her hands behind her back looking out, to where she could just see the corner of the red brick house, the curve of the well-known area rails. It was a favourite point of observation.

"He'll give me an answer," she said to herself confidently. "How could I doubt him? I know it will come—I was too impatient." And she thought again of Lester's kiss and how she had clung to him. Things were hurrying on. There was a rubicon of some sort to be passed by both of them. Lester should not pace it alone.

There was a strange stillness in the room which accentuated the painful breathing of the sick man, the slight rattle in his throat. The maid brought up a message from the doctor, and some breakfast. Agnes sat down, and with difficulty ate a little. She set the coffee-pot upon the hob for a later hour.

"Mr Nicholas is asleep, Emily," she said, "don't make a noise. He'll be better soon."

"Yes, miss," said Emily, dusting softly.

"I don't suppose it will be very soon though. The doctor knows. Poor old Nicholas! he'll be ill weeks and weeks."

Emily went out of the room and shut the door.

Below, Agnes could hear John Stanier pacing his study. He stopped every now and then to begin again; a habit he had contracted before the commencement of the day's work, and which, in its methodical precision, usually irritated the girl. To-day she was glad to know he was about, but his footsteps seemed more uncertain; they stopped more frequently than usual. It seemed as if he too were listening. Since the previous night, when she had parted from him, Agnes had not given her father a

gentle thought. Now in contrition, she felt that it was time in their common anxiety that she should go, and bring him news of the sufferer. Before she could act on her determination, Stanier walked into the room.

A sudden shyness seized the girl. She wondered what his words would be, whether he would make the first advance. He, as if unwilling to meet his daughter's look, turned to the bed at once, and at the sound of the footfall Nicholas started up from his sleep, eager questioning in his eyes.

John Stanier bent over him.

"Lie down," he said.

But Nicholas leant on his elbow; clammy drops stood out on his forehead. He clasped and unclasped his damp hands.

"Has it come, John?" he asked with trembling impatience. "Have you brought it to me?"

Stanier answered tersely, drawing a newspaper still in its wrapper from his pocket.

"Yes," he said, "it's come."

The trembling fingers of the sick man tore off the covering and fumbled a little among the sheets, but his strength was not equal to the unfolding.

"Read it, John—read it to me."

The schoolmaster took the paper, running his fingers down column by column. Then he ceased the search abruptly, waiting—hesitating.

Agnes crept up, and looked over her father's shoulder. She wondered what this excitement was on which Nicholas counted so much. A presentiment came to her that she was to see her name in print, her experiences, perhaps, according to his interpretation, dragged before the public. But, watching the sick man, his weak body tense with expectancy, his eyelids hardly quivering, and his eyes fixed to straining point upon the schoolmaster's face, she said nothing.

Then Stanier in a hurried, unusual tone of voice, read: "We regret that we have been so overwhelmed with communications on the subject that Mr Clulow's extremely long article has been crowded out. The matter is now closed, Ed."

There was a painful silence. Agnes saw disappointment painted in ghastly letters on the sick man's face; saw the last struggle between his worldly ambition and his spiritual faith. In his fingers he crackled the paper feebly.

"Not a line," he said, "not a line. And I thought that just once," he muttered, "they would listen to me in London—just once before I died. It's too late now, it's too late——" he rocked himself to and fro.

Agnes wished to laugh. The whole thing indeed was childish, absurd, a thing for merriment, not for grief. Yet, biting her lip, she struggled against the force of tears.

"Why, Nicholas," she said, laying her hand on his shoulder in a consoling fashion, "whatever it is, it's better out of the paper. I know about it and you know about it. Who else would care?"

The sick man listened to her voice and words, but his body kept on swaying, he uttered broken regrets.

"All the world ought to know of it—all the world."

Stanier came forward, and the father and daughter laid the poor trembling form back amongst the pillows.

Stanier had no idea as to the subject of this anxiety. Nicholas's essays, letters and poems were all to him as so much waste paper, but the man himself in his suffering claimed his pity.

"Be a man, Nick," he said, dropping into the colloquialism of their old boyish acquaintance. "Come back to the Latin, to the boys—you'll be a great—"

he checked himself, knowing well what lines of false reasoning and false hope he was running out for consolation. But the dying man's face was turned to him gratefully.

"Is it the chastening of the Lord?" he said. "Was it for that I was denied it? Was it for that I'm to die unknown?"

John Stanier had no words to give on the brink of the grave.

"Are they calling, John?" repeated Clulow. "Hark! Are they calling?"

"Who?" asked the schoolmaster, his brows knitted.

"The Redeemed, the Redeemed out of many nations."

But Stanier had drawn away from the bed and walked out of the room.

Alone, the old fear of an hour before returned to Agnes. Why did her father go — he had had nerve for one crisis, why not for this more awful one?

An uncanny feeling possessed her that as Clulow held her hand so tightly, he must lead her to see what he saw behind the veil, that she must follow him whither he went.

She watched his shrunken, panting form. She listened to his intermittent breathing, rattling after each slow word. He opened his closed eyes.

"Kiss me," he said suddenly.

Kiss him? What a dreadful thought—when his brow might be cold like his hand—for her warm lips to touch it. An intense horror seized the girl—she tried to leave the bed, to call for the servant again; but Nicholas clung to her, and his failing strength was so pitiful that she wavered in her efforts. There was no need to wrench her hands from his; they fell nerveless upon the sheet. His lips only repeated the request.

A gust of hail dashed against the window. She

watched the dumb pleading in his eyes, the movement of his mouth. But presently the storm passed and the words still came—so slowly and painfully—but strangely strong with his desire.

"Kiss me, guardian angel," he said, "kiss me, because I saved you. The Army of the Redeemed are calling and I must go, now—now—kiss me, and say 'To-morrow.'"

And she kissed him as he wished, sobbing "To-morrow," and the hot tears raining down her cheeks fell at last on a dead man's up-turned face.

Why, she thought helplessly, did she stand there weeping? Why did she say "To-morrow"? She would ask him again to speak to her, to put from her the kiss, the hateful touch that killed the remembrance of yesterday's sweet moments; ask him to give her back the word she had uttered in her fear.

But there was no movement on the bed, only a terrible, stony silence, which seemed to have benumbed the very stir in the street.

This then was Death—so ugly—yet so peaceful. The head lolling back, the hands wide apart, almost alive in their position, yet so unmistakably dead, the little rift between the lids, suggesting the vacant eyes beneath—all gruesome, helpless, fearful.

It seemed to Agnes as if a spell had been woven around her, that the silence of the grave would be hers for ever. She longed for a passer by to shout—a child to whistle in the street; even the storm of wind was over, and the pale sunlight threw a shaft across the dead man's ashy face, lying among the pillows under the red chintz canopy.

She tottered to her feet the grip of terror upon her; the shout in her ears, that to-morrow it was for her as it had been for him to-day—that "to-morrow," which she had fancied full of joy and love. The ghost-like mystery of the unknown appalled her. As she crept towards the door it seemed to her distorted im-

agination that the dead man had risen and followed. She felt still the touch of the icy hand. She got out of the room at last, breathing again on the draughty stairs. The ticking of the grandfather's clock on the landing seemed a sound to guide her back to life. She walked forward mechanically and reached it, waited a second, and passed it again, still going down the stairs. Now at last her feet grated on the tiles in the hall. She crossed this rapidly, and pushed open the door in the corner. As it banged to again, it was as if she had shut out for ever the evil thing that pursued.

A man stood by the window. His back was towards her. She saw him, tall and immoveable, and at his immobility she felt she must shriek. Why must there be a rigid form to meet her here, as there? But as the door closed noisily, the man turned his head, and though he looked away again immediately, the girl knew that it was Philip Assheton, young, strong, full of vigorous life. She marvelled that she had ever hated Philip. To-day, how good it was to see him. He moved an arm, a leg, and now his fingers passed across his hair. In the intensity of the relief she trembled from head to foot and clung to the door-handle while the giddiness swept over her.

He was evidently waiting for her to speak, but her silence was unavoidable. She dared not trust her voice.

"Miss Stanier," he said, so stiffly that at another time she would have laughed. "I've come to you with a supplication which I've no hope that you will grant. At least will you listen to it?"

He won no reply. She failed to consider the meaning of his words, she gloried in the rich inflexion in his voice; there was no wheezing or huskiness there; no broken or halting phrases.

He went on methodically.

"I've come to ask your forgiveness for my unwarrantable behaviour the other morning. You were right to think that my Christianity was but an abstract theory, when I could show myself so unworthy of my faith. I'm going away very soon, going to take up a new life and learn the discipline I need. It's possible that we shall meet very seldom in the future. I've come as I said, to ask you a favour before I go."

Agnes, if he had only known it, stood there utterly unheeding of his talk. She began to wonder if her father knew yet that Nicholas lay dead upstairs.

"I'm told that Robert Lester has persuaded you to speak on Friday night, at a mass meeting of the dyers," Philip continued, "do you realise what such a step means?"

Still no answer. It was strange that this girl, usually so impetuous with her disclaimers, made no sign. Philip's voice took an impatient tone.

"I suppose you resent my fresh interference. I risk this from my very great respect and affection for your father; from my overwhelming desire that nothing fresh shall occur to cause you to drift away from each other. I want to tell you that your meeting will be a useless one. The masters are making an offer to the men this morning, and if they don't accept it they will sink into hopeless difficulties and alienate the last vestige of sympathy that is left to them. Robert Lester will have unwieldy tools in his hand."

Lester's name again. Agnes heard him now. It was the same old Philip after all, haranguing away, casting his maledictions on his arch enemy. She began to move across the room towards him, and he turned at last and faced her. For a second he hardly saw her, so full was he of his pleading.

"Is this promise too much to expect, Miss Stanier, as a final—" then in astonishment he stopped. There was something about the girl that had transformed her. She was pallid to the very lips, but the whole expression of her face had changed. He had never seen her like this before.

"Are you ill?" he stammered—"has anything happened? Tell me quickly."

She had reached his side now. She ran her hand down his arm, clasping the strong warm hand, swaying helplessly as she laughed and cried.

"Miss Stanier—Agnes—what is it?" he cried. "Dear little girl, what is it?" His arm had stolen round her waist; she did not appear to notice it, but clung to him as a child for protection.

"Ah, Philip," she said dully, "you're alive—I'm glad—I'm glad. Oh! don't stop speaking—go on speaking—I don't mind what it is. I want to hear your voice." She passed her hand over her forehead. "Did you say something about a speech? Oh, I shan't make a speech because—Philip"—with a little sob—"because—this is quite true—Nicholas is dead. I've seen him die. It's awful—it's awful!"

She slid from his arm on to the floor. She crouched close to him, crying helplessly. Philip looked down at her at his feet.

"Nicholas is dead," he repeated slowly, "Nicholas is dead?"

An expression of marvellous relief crossed his face. It seemed as if his thoughts had out-raced this knowledge; as if he had been lifted from some dark cold vault into the blinding light of summer sunshine, and through the cracks and crevasses of the assumed nature—the false life which had kept them so long from one another—he had seen smiling at him the face of her soul. What did anything matter beside the joyfulness of this. He let his hands fall upon her soft fair curls;

as he did so he jerked back his head with a familiar gesture as if invoking a blessing, and, with almost a smile on his lips, looked out to the stormy sky.

"Thank God," he said simply. "Thank God!"

CHAPTER XVII

HUSBAND AND WIFE

A STRONG south-westerly gale had been blowing all day up the English Channel. Through the country along the coast, the early April dust whirled in driven clouds between the rustling green-tipped hedges, and the branches of the trees had been twisted, by the fury of the wind, hither and thither in contortions. From the caves and crevasses in the cliffs rose the boom of the waves, as they broke in snowy foam upon the rocks. When the storms came, the salt spray, caught up by the wind, mingled with dancing rain-drops that seemed never to reach the earth, but against the windows of the light-house and fisher cottages spent themselves, or streaked with stinging force the faces of the way-farers struggling on their road.

Darkness had fallen, when for a minute a belated South-Western train, steaming against the hurricane, stopped at a small station, and passed on.

Only one traveller descended, and the sleepy porter ran on to the deserted platform with a lantern, to meet him.

"A fly, sir?" he said, in answer to an inquiry, touching his cap—"been here since last train, sir," and he staggered on in front of the passenger, a leathern bag on his shoulder and a bundle of wraps in his hand.

As they went out on to the road, the light of the moon shone out from between tempestuous clouds, and fell on the figure of Robert Lester. He stood in the

doorway of the station, his hands thrust into his ulster pockets, the cape in the draught flapping about his ears, his cap drawn well over his eyes. The porter put the luggage on the roof of the fly. The driver woke up and jogged his dejected-looking horses in the mouth till they moved uneasily. With a nod of his head to the man, as if to emphasise former instructions, Lester entered the carriage, slammed the door, and the old musty vehicle rolled off into the night.

Lester, huddled in his rugs, his head pushed forward, his gaze fixed through the closed window, sat in the sombre abstraction of a reverie. The moon lit up his face; now and again the pupils of his eyes dilated with a transient look of fear, as if in his communing with the past he were apprehensive of the near future.

A mile or two had been covered before he changed his position, or appeared to notice the discomfort of the carriage. Then he took out his cigar case, and dropping the ill-fitting window as he smoked, let a rush of soft air into an atmosphere redolent of rats and stable straw.

"What a storm they've had," he ejaculated as the carriage jerked over a large broken bough in the middle of the road. "'Pon my soul, it's everywhere the same. No rest or peace for the world, or the men in it!"

The fly turned a sharp corner and went in between stone gate-posts, and up a short avenue of laurels and holly. A look of expectancy flashed into Lester's eyes, but he shrank back from the window; his fingers holding the cigar trembled.

The carriage stopped and he sprang out.

"Wait for me," he cried to the driver over his shoulder as he ran up some stone steps and pushed his latch-key into the lock of the front door of the house. "Go round to the back and wait for me. Don't take

the bag in. I'll let you hear if I don't want you any more to-night."

Then he walked into the hall; his footsteps echoed on the stone floor.

The place was cold and dimly lighted, a little oil lamp stood on the marble table, among old doeskin gloves, worn caps and cigar cases. He laid his hat down, and glanced up at the rack on the wall where hunting whips dangled, and a stalking glass on a strap in its black case, amidst a row of capes and overcoats.

A bitter smile crossed his face. "The past," he said, "damn the past!" and he went further into the house.

He opened a door on the right. It led into a long library. He put down the lamp he had carried from the hall on the mantelpiece. His breath curled before him in the cold musty atmosphere of the room. The books in the wide shelves looked undisturbed. The shutters had been closed, but the faded red silk curtains were undrawn. Large ormolu cabinets, and round leather-covered tables in the corners, seemed in their heavy immobility to accentuate the whole impression of disuse—of desertion. Some white and gold paper shavings filled up the grate, the fire-irons lay in their places in polished regularity. In the middle of this room Lester stood, looking round as if he had strayed into some forgotten country. He walked aimlessly to and fro, glancing from thing to thing, renewing old acquaintanceship; as his footsteps fell with dull thuds on the worn Indian carpet, his gait bespoke utter weariness and indecision. He seemed to be seeking time, for he made the round of the room twice, then staring into the cold fireplace for a moment he took up the lamp and went out again, closing the door behind him.

In the hall a woman in a nurse's dress stood waiting. She scanned his face, and as they confronted each other silently in the faint light, his throat

worked painfully in an effort to utter some words of greeting.

"Still here, nurse Rayne?" he said at last; "I'm glad."

"I shall always be here," replied the woman in a soft voice, "as long as she needs me. Hush! she will hear your voice if you talk loudly."

"I've come to see her," he whispered. "I'm not going away without seeing her. Is everything just the same?"

"For the matter of that, she has been well to-day, remarkably well. Rather a strange thing in this stormy weather."

"She didn't know I came last week?"

"No. How could I tell her?" There was a reproachful look in the nurse's eyes which did not escape Lester.

"About to-day—you told her about to-day?"

"Yes. She was dreadfully disappointed you didn't come by the 5.30 train. I wish you would remember that disappointment isn't at all good for her." Her words were formal, almost to severity.

"It's not too late. I may see her to-night, mayn't I?" he pleaded.

"Late is better than not at all," she said, and her pitying look followed Lester as, with a nod of his head, he went on into the room which she had just left — a kind of resolution in his step and demeanour, that reminded her in a measure of a child's bravado, when dared to venture at the fall of night to the recesses of some dark cupboard.

The nurse did not follow him. He went into the boudoir alone. It was a small octagon room, lighted by pink shaded lamps standing on carved pedestals, white china full of flowers stood on little tables; painted miniatures, photographs and silver ornaments surrounded tall pots of daffodils and freesia.

On a long low couch near the fire a woman lay

listlessly, her face turned to the flames. Books were on a table beside her, but they looked new and unfingered. From her lap a picture paper had fallen face downwards upon the hearthrug.

For a second she did not hear Lester; his tread had sunk noiselessly into the thick carpet; then with a joyful little cry she looked round.

"Bob!" she cried, holding out her arms, "Bob!"

"My darling!" He was beside her, drawing her to himself, burying his face in her neck, and she swaying in his embrace, clung to him, sobbing and laughing in turns, stroking his hair with her white delicate fingers, and drawing them down the side of his face. In that impassioned minute the game of happiness seemed no longer a make-believe to the man. His lips set to her lips, he touched a momentary reality. "My beloved," she heard him murmur, "my beloved!" Her cheeks were wet with his tears.

She nestled to him in speechless happiness, laughing, crying, till her very laughter and sobs intermingling, began to grow ungovernable. As he listened to her, recollection seemed to return to Lester. He disengaged himself gently, and holding both her hands tightly, he drew himself back and looked into her face.

It was a beautiful face, save for the deadly pallor of the skin and the look in the wide eyes under the heavy lids, eyes full of bewilderment, of strange, undeveloped enquiry.

"Hush! Hush! my dear love," he said endeavouring to restrain her. "You mustn't be like that—let me put the cushions under your head and I'll sit beside you, and you can tell me everything—everything I want to hear and know." Then with quick firmness he propped her up among the soft satin cushions; but she still gripped his right arm as in a vice, clinging to him with short hysterical sobs.

From that second's occupation his face had grown old and drawn again, all the radiant hope had flown away.

"Tell me?" he said half-kneeling beside her as she grew quieter, and playing with her little palm between his strong ones, "tell me all you've been doing—to-day for instance—I've been away an age."

His voice sounded cold and formal; he seemed to talk for the sake of talking.

She looked at him with a puzzled expression, knitting her brows; her little shuddering sobs ceased.

"Why do you take your arms away?" she said fretfully; "you're not like you used to be. I was so terribly glad to see you, and now you chatter like a stranger. What is it, Bob? What is it?"

Her cheek held still the flush of happiness and her eyes had grown brighter. As he looked at her he divined the dulness that would creep back to them presently. The reproof in his voice veiled the misery.

"Don't be a silly child! I want you for my sake to get well. How are you going to get well if I excite you by my foolishness?"

"What's foolishness?" she said querulously. "Do you call coming to see me, foolishness?"

"No, no, dear love, not being with you—but I can't allow that what's sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose, and if I make a fool of myself, I'm not going to let you get out of hand too."

He tried to speak lightly, but the effort was a failure.

"You haven't answered my question," he continued, as she seemed more contented; "what have you been doing to-day?"

As if about to tell him a secret, she leant forward confidingly and put her hands on his shoulders, her lips close to his ear.

"It's been a terribly windy day. I can't go out when there's wind. I just lie still and listen to it,

it reminds me of—it reminds me of"—she broke off frowning—"Oh it's an awful wind," she said again.

"What does it remind you of?" said Lester:

"Of Sicily—wasn't that where we were so happy?"

He winced.

"Yes," he answered.

They looked at each other, and she continued pitifully.

"Do you remember those horrid hot siroccos that blew dust all over the sky?"

Lester nodded.

"And how we used to shut all the doors and windows and pretend the wind was from the Inferno, because it was so hot, and that the end of the world was coming—and how we laughed when it didn't come, and said we didn't mind whether we went to heaven or hell, so long as we went together—do you remember, Bob?"

"I remember everything," said Lester, and he clasped her hands on his shoulders tightly.

"There were a lot of other things too that were glorious," went on his wife, her eyes contracting, and pausing before each word, as if the process of memory were painful, "but I can't put them together well; I can't think what's happened to my mind since I was ill. I'm so often ill now; I seem to drop into a great darkness, and when I come out of it, it takes me days and days to think again." She turned her hunted animal look on her husband, and when he gave no answer, but kissed her hand, she began to cry again with a little despairing wail.

"Don't cry, Stella, for heaven's sake, don't cry!—it breaks my heart." He pushed his right arm under her head, his face bent over hers.

"How can I help crying—when I never see you—when I get no change—no fun,—when I'm always ill. You don't know how dull it is here; you come so seldom."

"Poor child," he said, "I know it's dull; but when you travel about you can't stand it, you know."

"That's what you and nurse Rayne say. I think I faint because I'm always thinking about it, always wondering when it's coming,—because I'm bored. Won't you take me back to Sicily, Bob; it's different there—do—you promised?"

The arm under her head moved uneasily, as if it were stiff and cramped.

"When my ship comes home, little woman," he replied, "we'll go."

"Oh, you always say that, and you never stay here with me. How long are you going to stay this time? A long, long time? We'll ride on the Downs. I know I shouldn't be ill if they'd let me ride."

Her fingers were smoothing out the lace on the soft quilt, her brow was puckered painfully.

"I recollect," she went on, then she stopped. "There I've forgotten again. It's so stupid of me—about places and names, they never will come right. I believe that's one of the reasons I'm not so happy as I used to be." Then with a sudden apprehensive manner. "You love me just the same, don't you, Bob?—some men don't love women when they're ill."

"I love you just the same, well or ill, Stella," said Lester, kissing her fingers.

"Then tell me again how long you're going to stay."

"Till to-morrow."

"Only till to-morrow? what a short time! Over and over again when I've fainted it used to be in your arms, but when I came to again, you had always gone away. I know you hate to see me ill, why don't you say so?"

Her fretfulness was increasing again; in the embarrassment of her persistency, Robert got up from the couch and leant against the mantel-piece, poking at the fire with his foot.

"Do you like your nurse still?" he asked irrelevantly.

"She's very kind to me, but I hate nurses. Why should I have a nurse at all, why can't you nurse me? I asked Miss Rayne why you were here so seldom, and she said that you were dreadfully busy, that you were a great republican now—are you, Bob?"

Lester smiled.

"What confusion with her letters," he said, "more likely a revolutionist."

"Oh! you're not that, are you?" she exclaimed.

"Does it sound very dreadful, Stella?"

"You used to think it dreadful. On that first of May at Milan when we were there together, and we saw the row with the socialists. I shall never forget that. You said what idiots those sort of people were to try and get up a revolution, and why couldn't they leave well alone in a world so full of beautiful things."

"I was young then," said Lester in a hard voice; "one changes."

Stella turned her big sad eyes to him.

"I don't quite understand about it all," she said. "What is socialism?"

"Et tu Brute!" Lester murmured under his breath. "It's what we call," he went on, "the free forces of society."

"Oh, that's no explanation!"

"It's the only one I can give you. It won't make you better to know more; it won't make me better to tell you more. Let's leave the subject alone."

"It's funny when I'm ill," she said, taking up the smelling salts from the table, "that you should choose that time to be so busy with those outside things. I wish I'd something to keep you at home; I wish," she went on, her voice full of yearning, "that I'd had some children to play with."

"For God's sake don't say that!" burst out Lester. "It's the only thing to be thankful for—no children."

Then as he saw he had startled her by his vehemence, that her lips were trembling to tears again, he threw himself penitently at her side.

"Listen," he said, "heart of my heart, what do I want more than you? I saw a little child the other day—so marvellously like you—for your sake I held her in my arms, and sang to her—but—I want you only. Get well again and we'll go away, and I won't leave you or work without you. We'll talk again as we used to talk, and love again as we used to love."

But though he coaxed and petted, she had lost control of herself, rolling her head in the pillows, the tears raining from her eyes, and with a despairing gesture, he began in his anxiety to talk of other things.

"Would you like me to tell you what I really do with myself?" he asked with forced cheerfulness.

"Yes," she sobbed; "of course I would."

"If you cry," he said, "I shall tell you nothing. I shall send you to bed, where I verily believe you ought to be."

Such a proposal seemed to her in the nature of a threat. She gradually regained her self-command and dried her eyes.

"The reason I'm away so much," he said, "is that I'm working for a great organisation. I have my time filled up every minute of the day."

"A great organisation! Who helps you with it?" she asked. "Who writes your letters and does your work, tell me? You never write letters for yourself."

"Oh, not many people help me," replied Lester evasively. "At present, only a girl."

"A girl! What sort of girl?" Stella was looking at him intently; suspicious fancies stirred uneasily within her.

"What sort of girl," said Lester airily, "how shall I describe her? The daughter of a rum old school-

master in the town where I am staying—tall, rather pretty, go-ahead; is that explicit?"

He felt half ashamed of his lack of candour, but he had no wish to allay his wife's curiosity about Agnes Stanier; indeed, it seemed to him that the sound of her name jarred at such a moment, as he struggled to drown, in this dream of the old life of peace and happiness, the stinging remorse and self-contempt for his weak act.

Stella persisted in the subject.

"Does she come to you in the morning for orders?" came the anxious question; "is she at your beck and call all day?"

With self-conscious awkwardness he answered hurriedly.

"No; I don't give her morning orders like a cook, neither is she at my beck and call. There are days when she has to work, and days when she hasn't."

"And do you tell her your thoughts—your plans?"

"I tell her nothing," said Lester sternly.

His wife looked relieved by his words; she failed to perceive any change in his manner.

"You always said no woman could gather up the ideas of a man's mind sufficiently to be of any use," she asserted complacently. "That was to snub me when I wanted to help you with your book on sporting dogs."

"Did I?" Lester smiled. "Truly women as a rule are so proud of their own ideas, that they have seldom time to consider ours."

Stella alluded to the girl again.

"And you're not really interested in her? She doesn't matter much to you? It's not she that keeps you from me?"—this with an imploring look.

"Keeps me from you?" repeated Lester.

"Yes. Something keeps you from me. If you don't love me less for my weakness, why do you ever leave me? Bob, tell me what it is?"

Lester fidgetted about the room.

"Don't, don't," she said, her mouth twitching nervously. "Sit down — hold my hand — anything rather than that walking. You know how restless it makes me."

At her querulous request he stood still.

"Why do you doubt my love?" he said. "You see, when I come I only excite you. If you're to be quiet and get strong, I'm better away."

"No, no," she moaned, burying her face in the pink cushion, "but I'm so unsatisfied, sometimes I seem to have no feeling, I live in a sort of daze. Then comes that great longing for the future, when I shall be well again. I'm thinking over and over of all the little things in the past that made us glad, and even those things are getting far away. Am I going to die, Bob? Shall I never get well again?"

Her despairing gaze was fixed on him. As he watched her he longed that his prayer might come true—death, death for them both, that would carry them to forgetfulness—not the death that gave new life, but the nothingness, the negation of all sensation in oblivion. Racked and tortured—the power of his passion surging against the circumstances of his life—he comforted her, in sheer self-defence, with lies, letting them slide glibly off his tongue to bring some transient comfort for her suffering.

"Darling," he said, "my love is as real now as it always was. You won't die. You'll get better. We'll forget all this in a new lease of joy and live over each day of the past as before; only be patient, as I am patient—trust me—don't talk of death." For an instant he knelt beside her again. He let his head fall on her shoulder; he held her with desperation in his arms; but in his embrace she lay passive and exhausted; he grew frightened of the effect of his emotion.

"Come," he cried, rising to his feet, "we've had

sentiment enough for to-night, little one. Tell me about the new birds I sent you, and if you like your collie."

"Yes," she said, "they're all nice," but there was a perfunctory interest in her voice. She yawned, and twisted uneasily from side to side on the sofa—her eyes became vacant again.

Lester talked on, touching on one commonplace point and another, his look turned from her face. The while in his brain ran the maddening idea, that each visit to his home meant the discovery of a fresh loss of control, of consecutiveness of thought in his wife; a spark the less of intelligence, although what she still possessed was fanned by her great love and appreciation of his presence, into flashes of its old brightness. These interviews taxed his self-command to the utmost. He knew they weakened that remote possibility of her recovery, for he stole a measure of nervous force, all of which she needed in her fight against the vampire that sucked the life from her. The love he had given her in the first year of happiness burnt still to frenzy in his veins, and his egoistical, complex nature, satisfied for itself with little, but demanding that little in its entirety, began to entangle itself still more, into one great rage against the God that had given, and the God that had taken away.

The longer he talked now, the less she listened. From time to time a little moan broke from her. She moved restlessly.

"And so you know it all," he said at last, and winding up his dissertation, he looked at her. She made no remark, her eyes were turned up, wandering vacantly over the ceiling; a bluish tinge had coloured the edges of her open mouth.

As his voice ceased she gave a little start.

"That's rather dull," she said at last with an effort. "Why do you like those sort of things better than

staying with me?—you do, you know—and yet I can hear you saying—saying now——" she halted, and with a quick fear raised herself on the sofa, turning her head backwards and forwards carefully.

"I feel extraordinarily tired again," she gasped; "more tired than I've been before. Bob—Bob!" As she uttered his name the second time it ended in a little gurgling scream, and she fell back.

So this hideousness had come again, and it was all his fault. The excitement of his coming had been too sudden, too overwhelming. He leapt to the bell, but the nurse was already there, bending over the sofa, hiding the cruelty. He offered her no help, hurrying past without a word and going out of the door with trembling limbs, whilst nameless horror stalked beside him into the moonlight.

He went down the drive rapidly, but at the entrance gate he paused, appalled at his own cowardice. He made a little step, as if to act on an impulse to return and take his share in the tending of her frail form; wait till in her weakness she called his name again; see apprehension, recognition, beauty, steal back to the tortured face. For one moment he felt that his selfish passion could indeed be transformed into self-abnegation, as if now and ever, come what might, he could discipline himself for the sake of the woman he loved. But the wind, still sighing in the trees, seemed almost instantly to snatch the thought from him, for his hesitation passed. He forgot the fly with the sleeping flyman in the yard, and strode on into the night, going whither he knew not, but following the moaning of the sea.

The tempest of the day was fighting for its life, dying in shuddering spasms—conquered by the midnight calm. Across, on the unsheltered downs, the strength of the wind seemed still paramount, and Lester with bent head strove against it until he came to the edge of the cliffs. Below, in the light of the

late moon, the seething waters foamed and tossed, thundering against the face of the worn rock that rose precipitously and defiantly above the sea. He stood at the edge of the broken ground, his figure distinct against the sky, the storm around and within him. The noise of the sea was deafening. He looked down, into the shadows—on beyond, to where the gleam of a ship's light rose and fell above the heavy rolling swell, and farther still, to the black mystery of the horizon. The path of the moon lay uneven and glistening across the waters.

It seemed to him that her pure light struck into the very interstices of his nature. He felt himself in naked isolation in the universe, as if all else had vanished from this earthly sphere; that he alone was left, to be driven hither and thither, bewildered by the madness of his own nature.

Overhead, the clouds in patches drifted across the sky, and the stars shone in perfect clearness; they seemed to mock him with their changeless peace. For him there could be no peace again. His eyes sought the depth of the waters. A minute's agony, and he would gain the only rest possible, swallowed in that sea that kept her prey. Did she keep it? Yes, to-morrow, the next day, and the next. Then he would be cast up for idle hands to carry, and gaping mouths to chatter of his story, and his end. No, far better the touch of idle hands, the gossip of gaping mouths in life; the talk that said so much, and knew so little — when he could still give an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—rather than the silent protest of mutilated death.

It was very cold, and on the bare misty sweep of the downs, there was no shelter in sight. He began to walk, and as he walked faster and farther, he fancied that a face looked into his, and a voice echoed in his ear. The face was the face of his beautiful

wife, as in the flush of youth and health he had known her, but the voice was the voice of the suffering woman. What secrets did she speak of? What visions did she conjure up before his longing eyes —tantalizing with false hope—lashing his senses to remembrance? As it was before, so should it be again? And the sea seemed to sob in mocking answer, "Never, never," till again he crept to the edge of the cliff and looked down.

But in this moment of fierce longing for death, pure thoughts crept forth pleading to be heard, urging him to accept things as they were, to take up, as others around him were doing, the thread of an unsatisfied existence with endurance. In the sacrifice of his life, something might be saved.

Between strength and weakness, between love and death, he stood hesitating — a moment brimful of opportunity. The clouds passed over the moon and the spell of the deep waters left him. For the rest, he knew that he must still rebel against the daily restraint of repugnant duty. There was time enough, surely, to put fetters on his hands, a yoke upon his neck, and let himself be guided whither he would not. How could he now bury the lover in the nurse, the ideal in the real, accept sorrow in all its sordidness with patience, masquerade at resignation and devotion in the charnel house of love's promises. The thing was beyond human strength, at least beyond such strength as had been vouchsafed to him.

He paced slowly on. Queer ideas possessed him, drawing before his mind's eye the panorama of life. The outward convention of men's ways, the unlikeness of men's souls, of men's careers—evil rampant, where trust was evolved by apparent goodness—purity shining in the darkest places—sorrow wreathed in smiles, wealth in wretchedness. It seemed to him but a huge game of chance; when lives are shuffled

at the mercy of an inexorable destiny, what a lottery was hope or happiness!

Still in his shrinking soul he dallied with compromise. To-night he must do his best, and go back to the house. At least, for a moment he could hold his wife's hand before he left in the morning, and give all the promises she asked, to yield her content. Would she be changed, he considered—it was so long since he had seen her like this—would her features be drawn, repellent, ugly?

He had reached the gate of the yard, and the moon shone out again. With set teeth he walked on, up the path right to the door, and laid his hand upon the handle. In that instant he saw with startling vividness a new face gazing into his own—a face distorted, demoniacal. The cold sweat broke out on his brow, and with an uncontrollable shout of terror he sprang down the steps.

The devil was in him again, goading him from his waking repentance; and as the man that had for a short time lived afresh, preparing to suffer and strive, felt the irresistible power of that dominion, a sob broke from his dry lips: "Pity, my God! pity!"

In the distance the cabman woke up from his slumbers, hearing as he thought, a call, and came out expectantly with the sluggish horses.

Lester stood in the middle of the drive, his figure a silhouette in the moonlight.

The man drove towards him. He leant from the seat.

"Is it the London express you wish to catch, sir?" he asked in a sleepy voice, "it's due in thirty minutes."

It seemed to Lester as if by these matter-of-fact words he was awakened from some hateful nightmare.

Life the practical, life the battle, was shouting to him again. What question could there be of tempor-

ising. He had long ago made up his mind that one existence was possible, and one was not. No altruistic fancies should change him now. This morbid pandering with alternatives was absurd.

"Yes, yes," he cried, "the London express, I mustn't miss it—drive fast."

He sprang into the cab, and ponderously they rumbled out on to the high road.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HURRYING OF EVENTS

IT was hardly the breakfast hour when Lester reached Waterloo and drove through the deserted streets to his club.

In the rack in the hall he found two telegrams. The first ran: "Our men have had fair offer from the masters. Will accept. Shall you return?—Jones, Secretary." The other: "I cannot speak for you tomorrow. You are much needed here.—Agnes Stanier." They were both dated the previous evening.

Lester found these telegrams a distinctly disturbing element to his coffee and fried egg. For the first message he had been partly prepared. There was no shock or disappointment in the news; it had to come, therefore the sooner the better. Any delay to the foregone conclusion was to him merely a waste of time. The telegram from Agnes Stanier was, however, a puzzle. It held more meaning than the few words expressed. Something fresh had occurred in which she saw reason for reticence. He wondered indeed if the father's influence had really dominated her; if she were in durance vile. He could not quiet his conscience regarding the girl. Truly he owed her more than the mere payment for her services. He had no heart to face fresh troubles and complications, and wished indeed that it were possible to telegraph that he should not return; but his pride forbade his acting on the thought. He had been fighting a losing game all the time, but he would fight it to the bitter end, and face the

remaining hours that lay full of possibilities before him.

It was nearly three o'clock when, tired out in body and soul, he strode up the hill from the station towards his house in Stoneyard. His mind was still a blank as to any plan of action. The night of emotion had stolen all his energy; he was conscious of nothing but the intense desire to gather up his belongings, hurry through the evening with its varying interviews, and escape from this town and his own futilities.

There were his quondam-followers to be dealt with. Those amongst them who remained faithful he must disperse with dignity; for the other turncoats he could hide his contempt in the shake of the hand, or the pat on the back, which means so little, and achieves so much. He was fully alive to the fact that he must still play his part, have a good reason up his sleeve for every unexpected step, in short, keep the band playing to the last.

He wondered if he would find a message from Agnes Stanier in the house. She had been so determined about her speech that in spite of the strange scene in which he had parted from her, in spite of his having plainly shown her that she had best leave him and his schemes alone and follow her father's wishes, he was filled with conjecture by the definite simplicity of her telegram. This new line of action he was convinced, was not of her choosing. It was evident that some circumstance of importance, must have crossed her path to decide her not to speak. Certainly this decision should save him from difficulties on her account; yet everywhere difficulties were lurking; he knew it only too well. He would need a stock of moral courage, no, that was hardly in his line, rather of hard-bitten devilry, to carry him over the next day, and then—and then—

Musing thus he reached the High Street. On the

pavement and on the lower steps before his house a few men were gathered — undoubtedly waiting his arrival. His brow knitted. "So soon," he muttered to himself, and quickened his pace.

As Lester approached them, these five or six men stood dumbly, shuffling from one foot to another, and twisting their caps between black and moist fingers.

Throughout the winter they had been the foremost of those followers who had echoed his words and sentiments, and danced to his tune. During the last few weeks, however, the iron of privation had entered their soul and weakened their allegiance. Still dominated by Lester's influence and more or less afraid of him, they played the double game between him and Assheton, keeping themselves free from responsibility, hiding each under the cloak of the other, determined that when the day of reckoning came, there would be no man amongst them to call by name for censure. It was the knowledge of this that aggravated Lester so desperately. "Flocks of geese—droves of pigs," he had cried, "not a man amongst them;" and Assheton, quietly noting the same facts, understood that the falseness of the situation was sapping the strength of every man's character—was making cowards of them all.

When at length the money gave out, and Lester failed in his promise of more; when the outlook had become blackest, and those on strike were preparing to go back, beaten, sickly, and impoverished to their old work at the old wage—the morning came with the offer from the masters. It brought about a complete revulsion of feeling. It was a victory on principle, a victory they had never expected to gain, a victory that had been won through Assheton's influence. The smallness of its meaning was forgotten; the dyers flung themselves jubilantly at the shilling rise, and Assheton became the hero of the hour.

"He worked that trick like a true gentleman"—"the workman's friend"—"a heart of gold"—and all the rest of the eulogies were poured upon him that men and women keep for their rescuers, or comforters, in that moment of gratitude which comes, some-while or other to most flesh.

And the blessings for Assheton meant the curses for Lester. In the earlier months there had been a certain amount of puzzling at the coldness between the two men, but now of a sudden it was understood. Lester was a ruffian. He was working for his own ends. He was pocketing the people's money. He was a professional agitator. A great storm of protest and condemnation rose against him like a summer tempest. If he dared to speak to-night, said some, they would wreck his meeting—they would tear him limb from limb if he showed his nose upon the platform—they would do for him—and the women's cry was loudest, for from the first he had been their enemy. Thus it was the tide turned; with little sequence for its rise or its fall.

From the appearance of the few men now before him, Lester guessed, perhaps guessing, exaggerated, the position of affairs. To their credit, be it stated, they had come in a half-hearted fashion to give him their rough advice, and still to yield him honour for his efforts.

"I've not cut it, my friends," he said, nodding carelessly as he passed, "in spite of the important news your secretary sent me. The train was deuced late. Won't you come in?"

He opened the hall door with his latch-key and repeated his invitation.

"Come in, all of you," and the group trailed after him with sheepish indecision in their footsteps.

Lester's first inclination was to take them to the kitchen, and tell them that they could air their excuses and scrape their dirty boots among the pots and pans

if they had a mind to it. But he controlled this petulant impulse, and they passed into the study. He flung himself into the armchair, from which, a few weeks previously, he had faced Assheton. To the men he showed no civility. "I've crawled beside them long enough," he thought, "and the game was not worth the candle. Now they can take me as I am, or leave me, as they like." He knew the position was a difficult one for them, but he had no intention of helping them out of it. Whatever happened they should speak first, of that he was determined; and he sat silently smoking and looking at his hands and nails, all grimy as they were from the journey.

"Theere wunna bey a meetin' t' neet, mester, I'm thinkin'?" came at last the tentative inquiry from the smallest and fattest of the group.

Lester had been ruminating on that point for the last few minutes, now he raised his eyebrows and answered coolly, as if in astonishment.

"The meeting? Certainly. Why not?"

The little man, having broken the ice, pursued his way cautiously.

"It will'na be much of a meeting," he said. "The men bey taken by th' compromise. They'll hear of nowt else. They wunna bey talked raound again. It's a rum world, ain't it?" he added compassionately, "but if thou holdst th' meetin', may happen 'twill bey a failure!"

"What else has the whole of my time been here?" laughed Lester. "I fail to see how on that score my triumphal progress can be checked to-night."

A tall, lank young fellow elbowed his way forward. Lester had noticed him the night in the public-house. He was a bit of an orator then. He wondered if his tongue would wag as freely this evening. The man cleared his throat, looking first at the floor and then for a spittoon; till making the best of a trying situa-

tion he began to talk with a nasal twang, which tempered his provincial dialect.

"Mr Lester," he said, "you've played the game fine—none finer, as I tell my mates. I know a bit about the great world and the big struggle for liberty. When I was over with my grandfather in Kentucky I would have been proud to stand beside you on any platform, but this 'ere place don't understand us. It's a bit behind the times, and I'm right down sorry that you're knocked out, sir, for I don't think over much of the compromise myself."

He paused and the corners of Lester's mouth twitched, but he said nothing, just inclining his head slightly to show that he had heard.

The young man bethought him of the spittoon again, but he passed the back of his hand across his mouth and continued eloquently.

"Now—I've made it my business to go round the town on your behalf," he said patronisingly, "and you've not the ghost of a chance. The men are all nuts on Assheton and his masters; they didn't expect the offer you see, and they're as pleased as a babby with a Christmas drum. After all, they were pretty nigh starved out, and an empty stomach's the next worst thing to a dry whistle. I believe the men will all be taken on again in the dye works. I'm applying myself for the overseer's place, but I'm afraid this siding with you, sir, has done me a bit of harm. After all," he concluded, with an air of satisfaction, pulling up an indiarubber collar from the hollow of his waistcoat and holding his neck to do justice to it, "it wasn't a bad fight."

At the last words Lester looked round quickly. There was a blaze in his eyes, but he spoke in a slow, indifferent voice.

"Explain to me," he said drily, "the terms of your victory."

And they explained it to him, with much emphasis

of its importance, much approval of its matter, much embroidery of detail.

"This is most interesting. Mr Assheton insisted on the compromise, aided and abetted by Miss Lawrence at her little supper party, is that the gossip?"

"That's so."

"Truly it opens out a vista of possibilities for convivial meetings!" was Lester's comment.

But the men did not appear to follow him in this line of thought. Their ideas just now were singularly simple. They had come here to try and stop Lester's meeting, and they would return to the subject when he had finished talking.

"Then on the whole," he said, "you consider the compromise as useful as if your full demands had been conceded; if, in fact, I had returned with fresh funds and fuller support it would have made no difference?"

They shook their heads.

"There wasna any more 'go' in it," said Bickerton, "with the wife and children grumbling all th' day an' no peace in th' house or out."

"Oh, the mates are anxious to see dye-vats again, ain't you, mates?" said the first speaker with a slight wink. "Low pay or high pay the work keeps un from th' fret and th' chopsin' of th' women-folk."

"The only good reason you've given me yet," said Lester, turning suddenly to the writing-table and dipping his pen into the ink as if the recollection of an unwritten letter had come to him. "No, friends," he went on, "you're probably right. We've misunderstood each other from the beginning. I've been working from one motive and you, may I say it, from no motive at all. I'm glad you've told me what you have to-night. The enlightenment has come just in time for me—thank you."

How tiresome, he reflected, all this was. To be annoyed, to enter into any sort of serious discussion

with men such as these, seemed so unprofitable. Of course, for the mere bravado of the thing he would have his meeting. If that was what they were trying to stop, they had much better go. He let his pen travel aimlessly over the paper. He thought his preoccupation might give them the hint, but Bickerton spoke again.

"And th' meeting, sir?"

"You seem possessed by that subject," answered Lester testily. "That's my affair, isn't it? You may turn it into a free fight if you like and break all the bones in my body, or you may stop away. I've no intention of shirking the meeting at the last minute."

"But weyn got fer t' sey th' mesters i' th' morning," persisted Bickerton.

"Pray meet the masters. Why shouldn't you? I shall be half way between here and Rugby by that time."

"Thou wiltna excite the men, thou wilt tell—" Webb was pleading, but Lester interrupted him with sudden anger.

"I'll tell the men what I choose. What's the use of dictating to me. It isn't likely that your friend Mr Assheton, or your gods the masters, will honour the hall with their presence. If you had the pluck to speak out what is in your minds you would tell me that you were hard-used heroes — martyrs in fact—that I alone am responsible for your troubles and sorrows. Are you afraid of my reminding you of this? You Trades Union officials should have thought of that before, when you got me to come down here. The meeting is mine to-night, and I run it as I choose. You will oblige me by leaving me now. I've important work to do."

"But, Mr Lester, sir—" broke in the little man with the corporation, genuine concern painted on his face, "we dunna want fer t' throw they over. We'er grateful, sir, indeed we'er grateful, but thou

seest how 'tis"; he scratched his bald head pensively, feeling a difficulty in this line of explanation.

Lester laughed.

"Oh, I don't blame you, I don't blame you; but keep your gratitude for those who make things easiest for you. I don't want it."

Then, as they could draw him into no further discussion, and it was evident that the meeting for what it was worth must stand, they went out reluctantly.

With a sigh of relief Lester heard the hall door slam; then he lit a cigar and wandered round the room. He tried to pack his books and papers, and gathering them together in untidy heaps, stuffed them into the farthest limits of small canvas bags that he dragged from the cupboard; but he could not by this means largely reduce the number. There was his armchair to go, his pictures, his piano; he must make some definite arrangement for these things to be sent after him. He opened the lid of the piano and ran his hand along the keyboard. Music—it was something that a poor devil like himself should have that left to him. His passion for it served him the best turn. The only moment of mind's rest granted to him was under its spell.

How he craved to-night to escape to where no room, no town, no people could remind him of his wasted weeks, his miserable failure in Stoneyard. Yet what was the failure in Stoneyard compared to the failure of his whole life—the ghastly failure of his own character? Every hour of the past night seemed to rise up against him in condemnation, and he could not even allay these unpleasant reflections by the knowledge that he had kept up illusions in the minds of the public.

Since he had started on his wild career, he had on one or two occasions played the game to success; there were some who thought that his occupation was his life, who believed that he was consumed to fanaticism by

his love of liberty, of justice. He had probably failed here by his own stupidity, by admitting the intimacy of Agnes Stanier—by allowing Assheton to prowl round himself and his schemes. That man had read him, as men read a strangely-worded book without its glossary, and he had probably drawn in consequence the most unjust conclusions.

The girl really knew nothing, but she would demand an explanation, and he would have to give her one, unless by some means he could avoid a meeting before his departure, and that was very nearly impossible.

He had searched the writing-table and his mantelshelf and there was no word from her, no note —a marvellous thing truly, when her notes and messages greeted him on every return. Of course nominally the engagement was broken. But she had shown plainly that she would not accept the dismissal. Probably she expected him to answer the telegram. Perhaps she had sent it as a coquettish ruse to win his urgent pleading that she should speak. More likely the simple explanation would be found in the fact that she was locked by the austere father in her bedroom on a fare of bread and water, with leisure for repentance.

He gave a grim little laugh at this idea, although it was not altogether a congenial one. For curiosity's sake he must write to her and find out the truth of the position before he went to take a public farewell of Stoneyard. No, on second thoughts, better leave well alone. A letter would be indiscreet. Besides, was it really his wish to see her again? He had something to pay her; he put his hand in his pocket. He owed her a little cheque—he owed her—a dark flush mantled his cheek as he remembered a deeper debt; he suspected that not so easily as by letter-writing would he part from this girl who had thrown herself so completely into his life; who believed in him,

who—what was the use of shirking the point—loved him.

That was the wretched part of the whole business. Engrossed in his own waywardness he had forgotten that not a machine but an impressionable child was doing his bidding. What a blackguard he had been to take her ignorance and faith into his service. Though he had long ago suspected how things would turn out, he had refused to treat the matter seriously until too late. She had probably found her common sense now, and discovering the chimerical nature of her hopes, had determined to avoid him. It was possible that Assheton had talked to her of his villainy, and had succeeded in bringing her to reason. That, however, was more unlikely. Lester tried to persuade himself that it had been merely a girlish whim, this fancy of hers, and that it would pass to make room for some fresh excitement. The thing seemed too absurd, too unnatural, that she should love him. He felt as if he had let her put her hand into his breast to draw out his heart, and that she had found nothing there but a misshapen stone. He seemed to see her holding it, ignorant of her discovery; he seemed to see the coldness, the hardness of the thing she fondled and trusted in. How could he save her from seeing it as he saw it, how keep her, both for his sake and hers, from the horror of the truth?

He looked at his watch. It was nearly six o'clock. He would delay writing to her now. She had made no sign—why should he? The only chance of escape lay in this. In the morning he would leave a letter for her, not to be delivered till the train left, and thus he would spare himself a disagreeable scene.

On the table lay a heap of pencilled notes. Lester had taken them out of his overcoat pocket; they were headings for his speech to-night. With careless

hands he tore them in pieces and threw them into the waste-paper basket. Still two hours must elapse before the meeting. "I go to it," he said to himself, "with an open mind. Better so when there's nothing to say." Then he fell again to his packing, scattering old magazines and papers in the coal-scuttle, and taking books from the shelves to cover the sofa.

The local paper presently attracted his attention. He took it up from the sideboard and ran his eye down the sheet. Here—a vituperative letter about himself; there—a leading article on the epidemic in the town; on the scandal both of the strike and the sanitary conditions. Suddenly he noticed a heading: "Sad death of Mr Nicholas Clulow. Funeral on Monday."

So Nicholas Clulow was dead; the old schoolmaster about whom Agnes had chattered and laughed, whilst he had listened absently. Everything was clear. She was in the schoolhouse with his corpse; a natural, womanly instinct made her at such a time shrink from publicity.

"What a merciful interposition," said Lester to himself, "and what a simple one—I've distressed myself for nothing with my idiotic introspection. Now, thank goodness, she won't be even in the crowd to-night. I should only upset her by the line I'm taking, and when I come to think of it her speech would have been quite superfluous. I don't like unexplained things; but that's settled, Heaven be praised!"

He banked the fire with coals, and kicking off the books that he had piled up only a few minutes previously, he threw himself on the sofa. In a few minutes he fell asleep.

It was an hour and a half later when he awoke. The room was quite dark; the fire was nearly out. He could see through the uncurtained windows the

flicker of a lamp in the street. His match-box was in his waistcoat pocket. Yawning, he lit a match, and rolling off the sofa held it close to the clock. It wanted twenty minutes to the hour of the meeting; with a smothered exclamation he went out sleepily, to wash and eat.

CHAPTER XIX

AGNES STANIER AWAKES

THE electric light, a new installation, had been turned on in every corner of the hall where Lester was to hold his meeting. The brilliancy of its rays showed up unfavourably the stained and dirty colour of the walls, and the moth-eaten wooden seats and panels of the gallery that ran right round the building. There was no suggestion of decoration, no attempts at cleanliness, to do justice to this modern sunshine. Everywhere hideous uniformity of things and people, everywhere the heated atmosphere and smell that arises from a crowd.

The men this afternoon had miscalculated. Once it had become known that Lester's meeting would stand, curiosity had packed the hall more surely than enthusiasm could have done. Half the town had stolen in to listen, to gape and chatter. The strikers in the novel sense of the security of their own position; the other working-men of the town, who in the weaving mills had been in constant employment and had nothing to gain or lose; these were gathered together in their wonder over Lester's persistence, ready to rise to a man in resentment of his probable reproaches, ready with Saturday-night ardour to risk a row if he gave the smallest excuse for it. Truly his star had set.

Naturally no manufacturer was present in the hall, no manager even. Assheton himself had stopped away. Things had happened more or less as he wished. The end of the strike was in view, but

how late this settlement—how late; so much unnecessary suffering, so much uncalled for friction between employer and employee had been the result of the folly of one man, for he felt that had Lester been absent an amicable settlement could have been arrived at long ago.

When he heard that Lester had returned, and returned full of fight, his inclination was to beard him in public, and for the first and last time to give him, at an open meeting, the lie in his teeth; but he checked himself in the same unaccountable spirit of sympathy which had never been truly stifled since their interview.

Besides, his mind was engrossed with fresh vistas of life since the hour of Clulow's death. The school was closed, and he spent his day in solitude in the cottage, Laurina having been called away for a few hours by the arrival in the county-town of a friend from America.

Hour after hour he remained alone; the book that he was nominally studying, lying for the most part face downward upon his knee. He could not read; he could do nothing but think upon the change of events which the next twenty-four hours would bring about in Stoneyard.

He thought of the girl in the silent, death-smitten house up the street. What would be the result of all this for him and for her? They had come to the parting of the ways. To-morrow or the next day Lester must go, and then he would learn irrevocably whether to hope or despair. He remembered at their last strange meeting the nervous touch of her fingers upon his arm, her impetuous clinging to his life and strength, her passive acceptance of his comfort. He embraced the memory in a kind of intoxication; and yet it meant so little. One person would have been the same to her as another in that period of shock. Her spirit had had time to recover. The

question now was, how would she meet her disappointment at the ending of the strike? This very morning he had started to see her again, intending to break to her briefly the news which others would probably render to her in garbled fashion—that the men had been satisfied by the masters' offer, and were to clinch matters finally on Saturday morning. But he had stolen away from her door without daring to tell her anything, without indeed venturing to ask for her. In his fear of her anger, when she understood the meaning of the compromise, he dreaded to rouse that ever ready instinct of revenge against himself, which would live as long as a bad man, under the cloak of a good cause, claimed her devotion.

Assheton knew of John Stanier's tentative efforts at reconciliation with his daughter, and how apparently unprofitable they had been. The father had in a manner gone clumsily to work; but he must have betrayed something of his great love, and have sown seeds for future garnering.

Yet who could hold Agnes back if she wished to stake her reputation and throw her life at Lester's feet? No one, but Lester himself. Her childish impulsiveness was capable of all, but it was unlikely that Lester would accept her sacrifice, improbable that this maniac for liberty wanted her youth and inexperience as gyves upon his freedom. A man of his type, who had obviously looked into the eyes of everything merely to find everything wanting, who sought his own satisfaction in the lust for the impossible, had surely drunk the cup of experience to the dregs. There could be no purity latent in his nature that wanted her purity, no faith to acknowledge her blind faith—nothing indeed had he to give, but the brute candour of cynicism and contempt.

And in all this Assheton was so helpless. He began to think of the plan of his own life as he was

forming it. How doubtful the question, whether she would ever need his comfort again? If she learned the truth about Lester, why should it make things easier for himself? No, he had better go away. There was his sister to live for. She had wanted him to be ordained, what was there to prevent him from satisfying her on that point? As night fell, Assheton was still pondering uneasily on wrongs to be righted, on lives to be saved in great cities, when he had yielded his personal desires to the will of God.

Meanwhile, with stealthy footsteps, her white face and neck swathed round by a black shawl, Agnes Stanier sped up the street from the silent schoolhouse to the Hall. The lights shone in a dim glow through the misty windows, beckoning to her, as beacons on a hill. In nervous haste she slipped her slender form through the double swing door, and, panting from her hurried arrival and the stifling heat into which she had plunged, crept behind a pillar. Shading her eyes from the glare of the light in the chandelier, she looked towards the platform. Lester had just come out from a little room under the gallery. He stood well forward, one hand in his pocket, his head thrown back; his eyes under the pent brow and heavy forelock of hair, looked like live coals. She thought his tall figure contrasted grandly with that of the corpulent chairman, whose fat, shiny face craned over a white dicky and gaudy tie. With important mien, this man tapped the table to start the proceedings. There was no one else on the platform; a strangely significant fact. Agnes had often seen Lester so surrounded by his supporters, that he had hardly room for his gesticulations. At other times she had seen him pacing about the hall, talking with groups, like a father to children. Never could she have imagined him in such loneliness. How cruel these people were—how cruel! With over-

flowing sympathy she could have run to him, and kissed his feet. As it was, she shrunk more and more into the shadow, resenting the pompous air of the speaker, who by servile compliments to the audience, tried to apologise for his present position.

It would not be long she thought before Lester would get to his feet and crush such nonsense, would tell them in his fiery eloquence the truth, would beat and batter them with facts till they had not a shred of self-respect left. He must, by the force of his personality, even though they had thrown him over, convince them that he was still the leader of a great cause. The pity and the shame was in the thought, that as far as Stoneyard was concerned, his work was at an end, and he had reaped nothing but cowardice and treachery. Then he would go so soon, and how glad he would be to go. She knew this with an aching heart. He must for long have guessed that these men were unreliable. It was that of course which had made him so strange, so reserved, sometimes so contradictory. He had no trust left in him; he had been deceived so often, what belief in human nature could be left? The people he wanted to make happy preferred their wretchedness; those to whom he wished to tell plain truths laughed in his face.

She had regretted her telegram ever since she had sent it—it was not explicit enough—but as no answer came, fierce as her longing was to write, a certain reserve kept her from doing so. Every knock at the door during the day, every sound in the hall made her heart jump in anticipation of a communication from Lester. Perhaps her message had hurt his feelings, perhaps he feared that a note might be waylaid—perhaps with his faith in all men shaken, he dreaded her perfidy also. Ah! but to-night she would prove to him that amongst them all one faithful heart was his, that he was still her ideal,

her hero, that in spite of his downfall and failure she would not gainsay him. Surely he cared for her with an affection suited to a stern, refined nature that shrunk from constant expression of feeling. Knowing him as she did, she would expect so little, and give so much, she would—the thoughts in her mind were suddenly petrified—the chairman had finished speaking.

Lester rose immediately to his feet. She watched him intently. She noted the turn of his arm, the nervous movement of his fingers, as he pushed the water-bottle on the table before him farther away. At first the listening crowd were silent. She saw the motionless rows of dark, bullet heads, of collarless throats. Then a man clapped tentatively, and in a second they all clapped with him, loudly, vigorously, ironically perhaps, their feet keeping time, and the hall was filled with the noise.

Lester, looking into distance, waited till the clamour subsided. Agnes at one moment thought that he had seen her. Now at last he spoke, and there was a sudden hush. At first she could not distinguish the words. She was thinking of his appearance, of his attitude, of how he was working up to the climax, of how she could protect him if they made a sudden rush upon the platform. She was glad his "boys" were near him; a group of long-legged idlers, always in mischief, always hunted by the police; worshippers of Lester because he, as the champion of liberty, was one of themselves. If he expressed himself in a different language, what matter?

Lester had commenced his speech, and was evidently choosing his arguments wisely and well. He would rouse these men to the old enthusiasm, he would make them feel again as they had felt in the autumn.

Still he spoke slowly, a monotony in his voice

which she had rarely noticed before; and no words seemed to change it, each syllable was so distinct, so cold. She grew impatient. He passed over point after point without emphasis. She hardly noticed each one, so absorbed was she in his manner. Yes, now she heard him. What was that he was saying?—

"That they were perfectly right to accept the compromise?"

"That Assheton had fought in one way, and he had fought in another. If the men who had stood watching their leaders' struggle were contented, so was he?"

What was that—so uninteresting and formal on the strength of their Union, that advice on education, on each man "learning to act and feel for himself," that touch on party politics, the little sneer at philanthropies? The girl, breathless, excited, hardly able to contain herself, waited and waited for words which never came. At the end of twenty minutes Lester had finished, and with folded arms listened with impassive countenance to the perfunctory applause; to the hurried vote of thanks he merely bowed a response and so hastened the conclusion of the meeting.

An overwhelming buzz of conversation and laughter broke out. Agnes saw the "boys" crowding to the platform, their hands and heads were busy, in gestures expressing disapproval of their leader's lack of dash.

Astonished and bewildered, she left the sheltering pillar, half longing to escape, half longing to stay. On either side of her, men filtered out of the hall. As they passed they made loud comments on the meeting.

"Might 'a' stayed at th' 'Bird-in-Hand' and 'ad another 'a'f pint, for all that was worth," said one.

"Thought it had been a case of the devil among the tailors," said another; "but that chap's like

the rest of them — knows which way his bread's buttered."

"Darned clever stroke that," remarked a third.

"Robert Lester knew well enough wey'd pull 'im off th' platform if he said a word agen th' masters just now"—and so on.

She heard it all, while with stone-cold feet and aching head she waited, till Lester clove a passage through the dawdling men. He went out with lifted head, not indeed near her, but through the other swing door. As she followed into the foggy night, she saw him stride down the street and enter his house; she saw the sudden light of the lamp in the hall as the door opened, and closed upon him.

She did not dare to wait longer. The tumult in her breast was too conflicting. The disillusionment of the past ten minutes was on a par with her disillusionment the night of her father's appeal. Lester had been cruel then, to-night he had been cowardly. Still for all this, she persisted he must have good reason. She knew that before trusting herself to decide, or to act, she ought to go home and think, but the feverish longing in her heart drove her to rashness. She must see him and speak to him at all costs, to-night. Surely, surely, he was thinking of her, waiting for her, waiting to explain all, to give all. On this wild impression she ran down the street, determined that no better judgment should hamper her till she and the man she loved were together again.

Lester came himself to answer her sharp pull at the bell. His hat was still on his head; he held the handle of the door. It was very dark and thick outside, but the light behind him from the lamp on his hall-table fell on her pale face and he recognised her instantly. Her eyes were turned to his, and the scarf had slipped back leaving her curls uncovered.

Agnes stretched out her hands. After all, then, he concluded, they had to meet and speak again. It was useless to avoid the fatefulness of it. Yet he made a slight effort.

"Miss Stanier?" he said inquiringly, his tall figure moving neither backwards nor forwards but blocking the doorway.

"Yes, yes, it's me. I want to speak to you, Mr Lester. Let me come in."

"It's very late," he demurred, "why not come in the morning? I was just going to write to you. I've such a heap to settle up."

"The morning," she cried, laying a hand on his arm, "in the morning you will be gone. Ah! don't send me away."

Lester looked up the street over her shoulder. Some men were coming towards them. This interview on the doorstep was inopportune. Reluctantly he drew her inside, and shut the door. She followed him into the study. Then he turned to her, frowning:—

"Well," he said brusquely, "what is it?"

The girl stared at him nervously. All the memories that this room contained, rose up and rendered her speechless. The type-writer in the corner where she had worked so often, the stool on which she had stood when she had made her mock speech, the big arm-chair, the piano, all these things were part and parcel of his personality, and in this instant she saw herself but as an intruder, a mere outside, passing accident which had crossed his path; she had no place in his world at all. How had she dared to expect it. Truly she had expected nothing, merely hoped everything, till that evening when he had kissed her. Now, facing those cold unsympathetic eyes, she could not speak a word, and her lips trembled. Lester, watching her, threw more kindness into his voice.

"You're in trouble," he said. "I didn't understand Clulow was dead. Why didn't you write and tell me?"

"Because I thought I'd see you directly you got home," she burst forth; "because every minute I waited for a letter from you, that never came. I couldn't speak because Nicholas died, and I was too ill, but I thought you would want to talk to me. Don't you remember how we parted? Don't you think you ought to have written?" She covered her face with her hands to hide her rising tears.

"I see no 'ought' in the matter," asserted Lester, feeling that increased kindness would but complicate the situation. "Your father came and fetched you away, what other alternative had I but to let you go? Since then the whole complexion of affairs here has changed. Assheton has beaten me as I told you he would. How else could I have acted in public or in private?"

"I don't understand you in public," she said, "but in private don't you ever think of me?"

Lester lifted his eyebrows.

"Yes," he asserted, "I thought of you in so far that I knew you would be affected by the disappointment. You know, ages ago I told you how little there was to hope from men like the Stoneyard dyers."

She let her hands fall from her face, determined, with sudden self-command, to wring some straight answer from him.

"I'm not talking about the dyers," she said.

"Then what is it about?"

"Tell me why you kissed me?" she asked.

All prepared as Lester was for this question, the bluntness of its expression sent him momentarily off his guard. He hesitated in answering.

"Why did I kiss you?" he said at length with a

slight laugh. "'Pon my word, I don't know. Why do I do anything? You're a pretty child, Miss Stanier, isn't that sufficient reason?"

"Then," said the girl in a dull voice, "it was not because you cared. It was not because I'd grown needful to you—because you loved me? You kissed me for a whim."

"I kissed you for a whim," assented Lester gravely.

"And I'm nothing to you—nothing. A mere slave to work as long as I was needful for your purpose, and then to be dismissed and forgotten?"

"You mustn't be unreasonable," said Lester, throwing a piece of coal into the fire and trying to talk in a fatherly manner in the hope of avoiding the threatened scene. "As you know well, my gratitude has always been yours. I appreciate your work and your devotion to it most thoroughly. The cause that you and I have at heart has been a failure here, but you did your best to make it a success, and I thank you."

With all the strength of her misguided nature she rebelled at the sense of hopelessness this civil expression of gratitude gave her. She flung herself on to the hearthrug beside him, her slender figure doubled up in a burst of sobs, her curly head bowed against his knee.

"You thank me like that? Oh, how can you, how can you? Can't you guess what you are to me—light, life, all the world? I've worked for the cause because it's your cause. I've learnt all my lessons because they're your lessons. I would die for you if you would let me. You don't mean to tell me that we're going to say 'good-bye' now?—that we're never going to meet again? It's too awful!"

The tears ran down her cheeks. Lester tried to draw her up, but she persisted in her attitude. He had never wished in his life to play the comforter to

any woman save one, but he would have given much to have kept this grieving, so unnecessary as it was, so unworthy as he was of it, from this child.

In his great egoism the tragedy of it all was so far from him. He could not enter into it. He strove to kill it with his coldness.

"Hush!" he said, "this is sheer foolishness. I was a cad to kiss you, and a fool not to see how far too young and ignorant you were for my work. We don't want inflammable hearts for the individual, but for the masses in our ranks."

"Indeed," she sobbed, "I will be sensible. I'm behaving like this now because I'm so frightened of losing you. I know it's wrong of me to expect you to love me. You are so great; one person couldn't fill your heart. Only give me a little bit of it? I ask nothing more than to be near you. When you leave to-morrow, Mr Lester, let me go with you, I pray you let me go with you! How can I live here when you're gone? What do I care for what people say? Nothing at all. Let's be comrades, and I—" he checked her with a sudden desperate effort to free himself.

"This is not only foolishness but madness," he said roughly. "Let me tell you, child, what I am. Why should I keep anything back? As far as you're concerned I have shrouded myself in mystery long enough. I, hypocrite, selfish scoundrel that I am; learn to hate me and comfort your heart in that."

The intense vehemence of his voice brought back a partial composure to the girl. She rose to her feet, and he turned his eyes from her startled, tear-stained face, and went on talking rapidly.

"You see me here covered with the trappings of a great cause, one of the leaders of a party of reform. You, in your romantic heart, have seen only the glitter of these trappings, and think that

I'm also of gold. Ah, don't answer. I know it's true. My very inconsistencies and contradictions because they baffled you, poor little wiseacre, made me the more interesting. You didn't understand me, believing that I was too wonderful for anyone to understand."

She made an imploring gesture towards him.

"That's all true," she cried, "every bit of it. Don't tell me anything that won't fit in with that. I don't want to know more. I can't bear it!"

"So you suspect there's more. Even your imagination has been poisoned by distrust at last. Certainly for your own sake you shall be spared nothing." And then in passionate impetuosity he told her all the story of his life; the indulgent mistakes of his upbringing, the restless, untutored, lonely life which he had lived, in spite of his position and his money, the constant struggle for tangible, perfect happiness, the very want of which seemed to him security for its existence. How at last he had found the woman to love, whose devotion and beauty sank into his heart with such marvellous satisfaction that all his most yearning desires were fulfilled; the winning of her, the weeks and months of happiness together, and then the slow lifting of the veil, the awful knowledge revealed to him of the insidious disease with which heredity had tainted her blood. When they confessed to him that there would never be hope again, that she had been cut down in the flower of her beauty to a slow decay, he told Agnes how his reason seemed to leave him, how he spent his time in mad railing against the inexorable decree of his life. He told her also, that from the perversity of his nature, the luxuries and enjoyment that his wealth could give him, and the world offered him, still failed to bring relief. Only in the life he had taken up, there was some intellectual

satisfaction, some possibility of forgetting the love that devoured him so madly.

Lester told Agnes all this, and more. How hundreds of men and women went about with dead secrets such as his in their hearts, walking through the world as puppets, or embalming their dead lives with some form of religion or philanthropy. "Hypocrite that I am," he cried, "how dare I bow the knee to the author of my misery. If I tried to pray I should revile. This then is my work: it suits me best. You called me once the Wandering Jew. It was not a bad title, for my wanderings are all part of my punishment, and they are eternal, till Death releases me. No, no, I'm never in earnest. I tried to show you I was not, but you wouldn't believe me. I only wander where most mischief is to be done. Sometimes, against my expectations, I achieve good, and then it becomes a monstrous joke. Generally, as here, I do harm, and then I go, and don't return. Why should I? I tell you all this that you should know me as I am—not as you imagine I am—but pity me all the same—pity me all the more when I tell you that last night I was near the wife I adore, that I strove once again to escape from my ghastly nature, to relinquish the life I am living, to give her all that was left of me, and I could not, God help me! I could not."

His voice, hoarse with emotion, ceased. The girl, tall and slender, stood before him, motionless as a statue, her arms hanging limply on either side, her hands clenched, looking at him with a steady fixed stare. Now as he finished speaking he turned to her, his face drawn in its agony, waiting her sentence.

It was a critical moment. As they faced each other, Lester's name was called loudly from the street; there was a clatter of footsteps under the window, a loud hooray, a shower of pebbles against

the panes—repeated again and again. He moved slowly across the room, and threw up the sash. Even this action was a relief. A chorus of voices floated up, and shifted, as the men saw him, into a loud carol, some popular song of commendation. His old supporters, as the result of half-an-hour's carousal, had come to make him rough amends. Lester in a few perfunctory words gave his farewell to the crowd, and still shouting and singing they passed on. Then he turned his melancholy eyes to the girl as if imploring forgiveness for the irony of the event.

"That was unfortunate," he said bitterly.

She gave a hard little laugh.

"They must please you, those friends, with their sympathy. Have you told me that long story of your life to gain mine?"

Lester threw back his head despairingly.

"Not for your sympathy. I only want you to understand."

"I understand enough," she said wearily, "I understand that you're a hypocrite, an awful hypocrite."

Lester shrugged his shoulders. He had told her his story without extenuation of any circumstance, but in the inconsistency of his nature he objected to the line she was taking.

"You need not have known it," he said. "You have courted knowledge. If you're happier for it, so much the better. Heap me with reproaches, with hatred, I shall still assert I tried to keep our work impersonal. I did my utmost to hold from you all things of myself. Your very impulsiveness has been your undoing: I can't accept all the blame."

"You say you're married," said Agnes, still speaking in a dazed manner. "You say you love your wife. Does she know how false your love is?"

"False!" cried Lester, "false! Good God, not that!"

"Too false to be worth any woman's having. You would lose us all to gain your own content. Why didn't you tell me the truth long ago? Why didn't you save me from myself? Save me from the shame of my action to-night? You could not. You only thought of yourself; you never thought of what I might feel."

Her white face had grown old and pinched, her voice shrill in her suffering. There was a wealth of desolation in her words. Like strokes of a hammer upon her aching brain came back every word that Philip Assheton had spoken about this man. How ghastly was the disillusionment, how bitter, how torturing.

Lester meanwhile was growing angry, both with himself and with her. He had known her to be ignorant, but he had hardly reckoned on her great innocence. He thought her affection would have stood the test of his story. He even imagined that she would have been sorry for him. He did not understand that in her eyes he had become a completely changed man.

"I can't see that you're so much to be pitied," he said in a hard voice; "you put your head into a noose, and that's hardly my fault. Besides, if I leave you —Socialism still remains. It'll give you a life-long study. You mustn't condemn it as you condemn me. If you want love, you're certain of a love that would make any woman happy. You have shown lack of judgment about Philip Assheton."

Agnes put her hands to her ears. The reaction was awful. Must he go on talking like this?

"How dare you," she cried, "how dare you? Even if you're afraid of him as you seem to have been from the first, how can you offer me to any good man? My heart, with all its trust and faith, is broken at the feet of the man I thought you were. I've nothing left but my unutterable shame."

"I fail to see," said Lester, nettled past control, "what you have to be ashamed of. The mending of your heart will suit a saint. Heaven grant that he put a little reason into its composition."

But Agnes heard him as out of a dream. The wretched details of his story had brought her no sensation but that of unqualified scorn. He wanted her pity, why, why? It was she who needed the pity. She, who had done so little wrong. Her young, hard-judging mind swept over Lester with a great wave of condemnation, all the more forcible in that it was driven by the wind of reaction, turning her love, as he had prophesied, to hate, engulfing her soul in the agony of self-contempt at having been the dupe of such a man. Poor little child of the gods, she had ever offered a disdainful scepticism to the riddles of human nature; now she had the solving of one for her own task, she shrank from it with terrified incomprehension.

Stunned and despairing, she looked toward the door. What was the good of staying here any longer? She must go away and die. As she crossed the room something in the forced dignity of her bearing reminded Lester of Stanier's exit a few days previously. He divined her intention of leaving him without further speech, and determined to frustrate it. He strode before her to the door and stood with his back against it, looking down at her, his face shadowed with pain. He had invited her contempt, and he had risked her dislike. Now that she gave him both so fully, his spirit writhed.

"Miss Stanier," he said imploringly, "don't go like this. We've fought a tough fight for months, together. I've spoken to you to-night as no gentleman ought to speak. I've behaved to you as the scum of the earth. You don't know enough of life to understand what a man can be at times. But

for pity's sake believe me, as I swear, that I tried to save you from this. It's been one huge mistake. I suspected long ago where you were being landed, and I wasn't able to stop you then because I couldn't face the thing. To-night it's 'good-bye.' I know that you and I will never meet again. Be glad of it —I've made you unhappy, but when I'm out of the way you'll forget it all. I shall leave early to-morrow morning and go goodness knows where; always, I suppose, with my hand against every man. Just this moment for the sake of our association, for the sake of the real affection I bear you, for the sake of one forgiving word, I feel I could be anything you ask. I would go back to my wife, I would cherish her and make myself a slave to her life, I would try and atone for all I have caused you to suffer, all I caused her to suffer. You're so young and pure, the sunshine can't leave your life yet. Leave me some of that sunshine to give me strength; show me some tolerance. It's awful to see you like this. Miss Stanier, believe me, this once I'm in deadly earnest, say one word of hope before you go."

Agnes heard him, but each syllable as it fell was merely a monotonous sound. How pitiful that this man that she had once thought so great and good should grovel before her, simply to keep her good opinion to the last. He had given her father hard words when he had pleaded; why should she give him soft words now? After all it was not the Robert Lester, her ideal, who was speaking; this man's sayings must be meaningless to her, because he had driven the Lester she had known from her side, because he had stolen and broken her heart.

She thought all this mechanically, but never glanced at Lester. Her eyes, swollen with recent tears, were fixed on the panels of the door. She stood a few paces from him, as if she feared even to feel his breath upon her cheek.

"I neither see nor hear you," she said at last in a loud clear voice. "Let me go, please — now, at once."

Instantly Lester stood aside, and quickly and noiselessly, she passed out and left him alone.

So this was the end of it all. The iron bolt had fallen behind that episode. He faced life with its everlasting failures in the old solitude, with a fresh load to carry of hatred and suspicion. His look wandered helplessly round the lonely room — an uncontrollable impulse of despair, born of his exhaustion and hopeless disorganisation, seized him. He staggered forward, and burying his face in his arms on the table, cried like a child.

CHAPTER XX

A NEW DAY

AGNES STANIER went out from Lester's study with such decision in her bearing that it seemed as if the determination for some definite act was searching an opportunity.

It was, however, evident, that once at the foot of the three little steps that lay between the front door and the street, she had come to the end of her resources. Half fainting she clung to the area rails, and strove to find, not indeed a plan of proceeding, but a fragment of sensible thought in the chaos of her mind.

A single turn of Time's wheel shifts the world's scenery for better or for worse. From the town, palpitating with clamorous interest, she had gone into Lester's house, her heart beating high with courage and hope. Stupefied by a grievous sense of loss, she passed again into a street, silent now, as at midnight, in its shroud of fog.

Gradually the sensation of faintness passed, and in her disordered memory thoughts again took shape. She knew that if she walked down the hill to the left she would get back to her home — to the schoolhouse—and be able to steal unnoticed amongst the quiet darkened rooms; she could already hear the ticking of the old clock on the staircase; in the upper room Nicholas lay shrouded; below, her father would be concealed, burying his regret amongst his books in the study. Was it to this she must return? To begin the

week with a funeral, and then, as each day rose and set in monotonous sameness, take up a fresh life without happiness, without even congenial work.

Not that she would mind what anyone had to say on the subject of her friendship with Robert Lester. An hour earlier, the thought of the humiliation in acknowledging to those who had warned her against him, the truth of their warning, would have been insufferable. How odious the unreserved confession of her unutterable foolishness; how impossible to have received with submission the advice and counsels poured into her ears. John Stanier, pedantic; Miss Assheton, affectionate; Philip, triumphant.

But she had reached the moment now, when, with blighted faith, and heart numbed to every sting, she passed by coldly the criticisms of life, asking only for death.

Wednesday morning—what an age ago it seemed—Nicholas had died, and she had been prostrate with terror. Now the terror towards that death was turned to fascination. She remembered the kiss, the word that with fervid meaning Nicholas had asked her to speak—the word "to-morrow" that had slipped so unwillingly from her lips. What a fateful sound it had held. Perhaps compassionate of her sorrow his soul was hovering near, calling her if she could only hear it, to fulfil this promise of re-union, to share his salvation. A shudder ran through her frame at the phantasy of his arms lifted to embrace her, to draw her down beside him to the same cold, motionless silence.

She pulled up the scarf over her head and shook herself free from the fancy, coughing a little as the fog filled her lungs. She still clung to the area rails; the perfect stillness and the heavy canopy of thick darkness appalled her. There was no wind to carry a distant laugh or shout, to bring her the sense of

companionship. What she wished for most, was to leave the town. The uncertainty of where to go frightened her less than the pain of remaining. She knew the limit of comfort she might expect in Stoneyard, and how puerile, how absurd, her story, once divulged, would sound to other people. She would far rather trust herself away in the freedom of the country, where none would discover her, or speak of her again.

To what an extent Lester's thoughts had been her thoughts, his sentiments her sentiments; how blindly she had grafted her personality to his! She knew him at last, but as what? A wrong that could never be righted, a fraud for which there was no atoning. The horror of it was so strong, that she could not bear to stand and think. There were no half tones in her conceptions. Yesterday her world had been a Garden of Paradise, half unexplored truly, but full of delicious surprises and possibilities. To-day it was a howling wilderness, peopled with spectres and furies, from whom there would be no relief, no chance of escape.

Yet in her great desire to dispel this impression, she turned from her home and began to walk up the hill; above her, dimly gigantic, loomed the tower of the church; around, the fog closed her in. Once she looked over her shoulder, but the few paces she had taken made it impossible for her to distinguish the outline of Lester's house, even to see the glimmer of light through the blind. After all there was something merciful in this suffocating atmosphere. It hid her flight, it covered each landmark, the sight of which might have recalled some happy incident of the past months. She saw nothing, save here and there the wan flickering of the street lamp. She heard nothing, but the echo of her footsteps falling on the pavement. In time that sound also ceased, for her feet sank in the mud of the country road.

She pressed on with little thought of what she was doing, of where she was going. She had no guide in the darkness, merely a dawning intention to keep plodding on all through the night till she might come at length, as the tramps come, to one of great cities of the North. Mingling there in a crowd of strangers she would begin a fresh existence; in what guise was of small consequence.

Mirrored in her mind was a vista of the hours of her childhood—of her school-days. Days when she thought she knew so much, when an exultant feeling of capability and knowledge gave wings to her life. And she had known nothing really—nothing that was of any use or solace now. Books, masters, lessons, how she hated them; how they had deceived her. She remembered the high wisteria-decked garden walls that shut in her school. Would that she could tear them down, brick by brick, and trample on the purple blossoms. They had kept her so closely nurtured on mock wisdom and self-conceit.

How easy it had been in the glow of excitement and self-confidence to say she would never regret, never feel sorry for her sentiments and acts. When it came to the test what empty boasting every word appeared.

"Oh! summer land of hope," she cried desperately, "how beautiful you were—how false—how deadly false!" and as she walked on she beat her trembling hands together in piteous misery and regret.

Presently she raised her head. The sky seemed clearer; the fog had broken into wreaths of smoke-like vapour, through which, by the pale light, whether of moon or stars she could not tell, she saw branches of tall trees, like phantom fingers pointing at her. Now and again an owl hooted, and she heard the flap of its wings like the rush of a sprite through the air.

For a while she kept steadily to the road. She stepped in reassuring fashion through the mud on to its hard surface. A light breeze sighed near her. The wind was rising—perhaps to claim its sympathy she broke forth, as she walked, into snatches of song —strange melodies that Lester had hummed, when she had worked and he sat weaving his plans. The tunes danced in her head—she saw his eyes again as they shone to the melody. As she struggled with the torture of the recollection, her hurrying footsteps lost their rhythm—she hesitated, for the road merged into soft moss, and patches of heath-covered ground; her feet tripped unexpectedly amongst a tangle of ferns and broken roots. The smell of moisture on invisible trees and bushes filled her nostrils.

By some inexplicable mischance she had entered the wood—a long twisting wood—that stretched on to the moorlands; the haunt, they had told her, of strange spirits, lost lives, who, seeking their rest, wandered interminably. What was there in these to be afraid of? She had more in common with the disembodied than with living man. Now in her fevered fancy it seemed that soft-footed creatures slipped ever after and around her, and urged on her flight calling to her "Haste! haste!" She could not go back, she dared not stand still. Stumbling on, wrestling with her fears, she plunged deeper and deeper amongst the trees. Sometimes a thin damp twig cut her across the face, sometimes she had to push back a mass of underwood that, like invisible hands caught at her skirts.

Her anxieties centred into one desire—to get back to the highway again; but to accomplish that, while the night lasted, except by the most merciful accident, was an impossibility. She remembered having passed this wood many times with Robert Lester, but he had always refused to explore

it, or even to pass through to the moorland. He hated the country, he had said. In those saner moments why had she never built up his vagaries to some connected whole, by which she might have fathomed the truth, and kept her life free from his influence?

She was silent and stupid now, weighed down even as she walked by exhaustion; but against the impulse to linger and sleep, she fought doggedly. She feared sleep for the sorrow of waking again.

Suddenly her heavy feet were entangled in a loose tuft of rush grass. She stumbled, recovered herself, tripped again, and striving for equilibrium, lost it, and fell forward, rolling over and over, down some soft, steep incline. The roots and moss to which she clung gave way in her grasp; there was nothing to which she could hold, nothing to save her. Her thoughts had dallied lightly with death, but sinking in this darkness, she felt the throes of its terror, and, in sheer physical alarm, shrieked aloud. By some wonderful chance, almost instantly the passage of her descent was blocked. She had rolled against a light thorn tree, and it bent and swayed under the weight of her body. With both arms outstretched, she clung with bleeding hands to the prickly branches; in mercy they held her, and sobbing, gasping, her gaze upturned to the sky, she saw a light break through the darkness, saw through the encircling boughs amongst which she lay, the face of the moon.

The mist-clouds still drove across it, but every moment deepening in hue, the moon shone at last on the night in pure silver radiance above the mantle of fog, through which for hours she had striven to escape. The whole scene was illumined; the grassy incline down which Agnes had fallen, the shadowy abyss below. Quaint boulders grey with lichen, hung

like dwarfs mocking her predicament, on the edge of the bank. In reality, what a little way had been this fall, and she marvelled at her own timidity, till shifting her position cautiously, she caught the glint of dark water beneath. Upon its surface, the moon glistened in an ever-widening halo.

So that was the death that was awaiting her; a sweet death truly; to slip quickly into the arms of the nymph of the pool, to be strangled by the jewelled hair of the white water-maid. She had heard tales of this water—of its strange tragedies and consolations; of how broken-hearted men and women would wander for miles at the season of the bluebells, to seek death in the azure depths that carried the reflection of the flowers. Now, for herself, she had but to release her hold, to find, after a minute's struggle, a perfect peace. Ah! how much she needed peace—peace from her aching fears—from the scourging of her own soul. She moved a little, under the spell of this longing for the end of things; but she feared the brightness of the moon—its rays covered her like a curtain, they encompassed her in brilliant protection. She fell afresh, in her wonder, under the magnetism of her own vitality.

After all then it came to this, that she was clinging to life, helpless in the hands of an unknown power; that God ruled, as Philip had warned, as he watched her court disaster. How inexplicable the mystery! If the offering to be sacrificed on the great altar of destiny was to be the will of every man, surely each human being should take up existence dumbly and patiently, preparing for the slaughter. She had shrieked aloud incredulously, striving against fate, and the cost of this folly had been too great, the suffering too awful.

However, it was over now. The flush of youth was on her cheek, the blood of youth still coursed

in her veins, but of herself—there was nothing—nothing. What would the outcome be? She lay, her eyes wide open, passive amongst the twisted branches, expecting the climax of things. She chose neither life nor death. They might gamble for her as they would, and when the game was decided, her body would rise up and go quietly with the winner.

In her fevered brain, thoughts piled on thoughts, till, to her dreaming eyes, dazzled by the moonlight, it seemed as if the sky had opened, and against the shadow of a cross shone a Figure of Light; a radiant form; its humanity exalted into a Divine calm.

She became a little child again. All the pictures she had seen of the face of the Christ began to throng her memory. There were scores and scores of faces; some dark and careworn, some fair and pure. She could identify no man amongst them, save this wonderful countenance; a countenance scarred by the blood of many wounds—but transfigured by ineffable peace—peace in the eyes—peace on the firm grave mouth.

And his Presence had gathered to a radiant halo, all the sheen of the moon.

The girl's heart bounded with strange exultant throbs. She held her breath—she fancied that His welcoming hands were held towards her. Not empty hands, but full of soft white birds—so many—so many; and yet in their thousands they still wheeled and fluttered round him, as moths about a candle.

They slipped into His grasp—they nestled in His arms—against His breast, and the birds with broken wings and ruffled plumage were nearest to His heart. They seemed to her as the souls of men.

A strong yearning arose, that she too had wings—to fly nearer to Him, to ask Him His secrets—such eyes had read all the secrets of the

world. As she wished, she became possessed by longing; furiously she struggled with the branches that would restrain her, till the blood dripped from her fingers.

Again and again she threw forth a torrent of wild confessions and pleading, incoherent with mingled self-accusation and self-pity. She was ready to tell all, to yield all, that thus she might gain from Him consolation and rest.

But the vision and her ecstasy passed. The fresh wave of emotion was too much for her exhausted frame, and she fell back under the overhanging stones. Through the remaining hours of the night she lay heavily in the hollow—till at last she slept—a restless, troubled sleep.

The day broke, and the sun fought its path through threatening clouds. In time, however, the horizon cleared and grew pale and iridescent. The shadowy greyness of trees and bushes and broken ground became distinct in colour and form. Thrushes and blackbirds began to twitter and ruffle their damp feathers preparatory for movement and flight.

Agnes turned and awoke uneasily. She scanned, with troubled eyes, each object, clearly defined in the morning light. Sodden grass and bracken had been her bed, and the bruised leaves and buds of young primroses.

Stiff in every limb, she rose with difficulty from her cramped position and crept out from the sheltering cliff. It was desperately cold; the sun's rays were only beginning to filter through the trees, and gave no warmth. Her clothes and boots were soaked. She had worn no hat, and the long woollen scarf that she had twisted round herself the night before to disguise her features, swathed her head and neck like a damp string. She began painfully to heed her discomfort. The bewitchment of the night of fever and hallucination was passing.

She looked at the pool only a few feet below, and moving down the bank she stood on the brink. A moorhen fluttered from the bank and swam across, and the ripples of its movement caught the glint of the sunshine, and the colour of the young bracken; otherwise the water gave no hint of its mystery; stagnant and silent in the daylight, as in the darkness. The girl bent over it; she lifted her right foot from the stone, and touched the surface, but the action was only one of curiosity, curiosity about its depth, its possible experiences.

The emotion of the past hours had fled. The tide had turned. She was cold, hungry, full of human weariness, and commonplace craving for comfort. Forlorn, shivering and homesick, she crossed the threshold of a new day.

Presently she turned from the pool, and striking up the bank, found a beaten track in the wood which led over some open, heathery ground on to the road.

In the morning light the long white highway stretched out before her with broad invitation. To the left it sloped into the town; to the right it wound across the moorland, far on to other counties. Agnes stood motionless, looking about her. She drank in the increasing warmth of the sun; and watched its spreading light over the fields and budding hedges.

It was early morning, as yet there were no market gigs, no creaking waggons to disturb the silent beauty of nature. Yesterday, absorbed in the passions and ways of men, she had heeded no violets and aconites under the hedge, no undulating stretches of meadowland, no blackbird's song; to-day they were the best she had left.

As she stood weighing in her vague, undecided thoughts what step to take, what plan to follow, along the railway line which ran unsuspected be-

tween tall hedges fifty yards from her, an express dashed by—in a flash, and a coil of smoke, it was gone. On the girl's imagination it left a vivid impression. Robert Lester was in that train. She felt certain of it, felt certain that in some way or other it bore from her the last trace of her old life, her old madness. The tears started to her eyes. She wondered, if, in spite of everything, the cause that had been so much to her, held fragments of truth—if it carried a message past those who betrayed it. If indeed there were great realities for all men, to compensate for great disillusionments.

Along the road from the town a man was advancing. She turned away from the cloud of dust that whirled where the train had passed, and saw him. He wore a long overcoat and held a stick in his hand. He came nearer and she noticed he looked always to right and to left, and when nearer still she could not mistake her father's figure or gait. What should she do? Her first impulse was to dart back to the wood, back even to the dread pool. She could not bear his reproaches. Of what use was she to him? and yet—and yet—she stood and waited. John Stanier approached so close that she could count every line on his face. How changed that face was—how aged by anxiety. His eyes were tired and sunken, his head bent forward. He had been watching all the night; oh! certainly he had been watching for her. He did not see her yet. Her back was against a birch-tree; the grey colour of the wood made her its own. The girl kept her gaze fixed on him wonderingly. She was aware of a great hope, a great need. "He misses me," she gasped; "he's looking for me—he loves me! What new sight is given to me that I want what I see in his face—the love which I've never understood." She still stood rigid in every limb; he was so near to her now. Then quite suddenly Stanier turned; their eyes met, and with the brilliancy of the sun and his joy upon

his face, it shone for a moment like the Christ of her vision.

"Agnes," he said hoarsely.

She staggered a few steps towards him. Hectic spots came out and burnt in either cheek.

"Father," she cried, throwing up her arms, "father," and she swung heavily against his breast.

He gathered up the half-fainting form strongly. He held her with surpassing tenderness, his head against her curls. Their faces were turned towards the waking town.

"Come home, my poor little girl," he said, "come home."

THE END

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